

Why an arts degree still gets you a great job

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“Why getting an arts degree pays off,” *Toronto Star*, 08 September 2015, S6 (print version)

The value of a liberal arts education is that it teaches the broad skills employers want, argues a book aimed at helping students succeed at university and find a good job.



DREAMSTIME

An arts degree is as good as a business degree in landing a job, says a book by two York University professors. (online)
Creative thinkers are who businesses need, professors argue. (print)

Klassen, Thomas R. and John A. Dwyer. *How to Succeed at University (and get a Great Job!): Mastering the Critical Skills You Need for School, Work, and Life*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015.

As the new school year gets under way this week, many anxious students and parents are wondering whether a liberal arts education is still worth it.

The tab is about \$18,000 for one undergraduate year of university away from home, so somewhere north of \$70,000 for a four-year degree.

And for what, they might ask. Will studying the rise and fall of Rome help land a job? Does an appreciation of 18th century Dutch painters help the pay the rent? Maybe arts degrees are a relic of a time past, when only the elite went on to higher education and were assured of a job in industry or public service.

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The high demand for business programs attests to the fact that many believe that to be so. Programs like business, economics and commerce are seen as more relevant in today's hard-to-get-a-job world, offering the things employers want from new hires. The perfect skill set.

But that's not so, say York University professors Thomas Klassen and John Dwyer in *How to Succeed at University (And Get A Great Job)*, published this month. What these people are failing to grasp, they say, is that the skills learned while exploring philosophy, history and literature are exactly those needed for an interesting, challenging, and well-paying career.

"Business is crying out for people who are imaginative and who can problem-solve," says Dwyer, an emeritus professor in York's humanities department.

Students shouldn't fret from the first day they walk on campus about whether they'll get a job in four years, he says. Instead, they should have a fabulous time, go where their curiosity takes them and, by so doing, pick up the skills that will help them lead a fulfilling work life.

"Enjoy the ride. Do things that interest you and speak to your imagination," Dwyer says. "It's natural to think about 'The Job' and what happens at the end of university, but students don't need to be so stressed.

"Take it seriously and you will be successful."

Klassen, a political scientist, says the skills at the heart of academic rigour are "at the core of every interesting job and career": such things as identifying links and patterns, writing with analytical depth, working in groups, meeting deadlines, and learning how to communicate in writing and orally.

When it comes to business programs, Klassen says some students are drawn to marketing, finance and accounting because it is their calling, but many others are there because they are being pushed. The latter group, lacking the passion for the material, go through the motions. It's something employers are quick to spot later on.

Dwyer taught a critical thinking course at the Schulich School of Business, and says the students in business programs are "some of the best and brightest" he's seen. Competition is so stiff to get in, only top students can gain entrance.

The high demand for the graduates attests to the value of the education, but for many of the students, the learning experience is a disappointment, he says. That's because the rigid business curriculum leaves little time to explore other areas of study. So it can make more sense for some students to take an arts degree first and specialize later.

[How to Succeed at University](#) is a free download from the York University bookstore website. It is also available as a hard copy at most universities for \$19.95.

Kudos to UBC Press for allowing the hard copy sales to subsidize the free online versions.

The book is easily read and well laid out, filled with how-to guides and lists. It covers such topics as how to listen and absorb information. There's a chapter on research and creative problem solving. The section on interpersonal skills covers written and oral communications, how to present yourself in an interview and the do and don'ts of resumes, cover letters and presentations.

There's a chapter on how to get a job: the keys are networking, persistence and patience.

Dwyer says studies show that within four years of graduation, 94 per cent of liberal arts graduates have a full-time job. It may not be their ideal job, but it's a starting point.

"All you have to do is be better than that last 6 per cent," he says.

From the Book: How to prep for an interview

1. Wear formal attire, even if it makes you uncomfortable. Interviewers expect it.
2. Arrive 10 minutes early to show you can schedule yourself and that you respect the interviewer's time.
3. If you're offered tea or coffee, say no. Sipping a drink during an interview is not professional.
4. Take notes. It demonstrates you're an active listener.
5. The light conversation to start is to make you comfortable. Don't be tempted to relax.
6. Most questions have hidden meanings. Think before answering.
7. Interviewers watch for hints you are lazy, unenthusiastic, arrogant, or unethical, or have problems with authority.

Source: How to Succeed at University