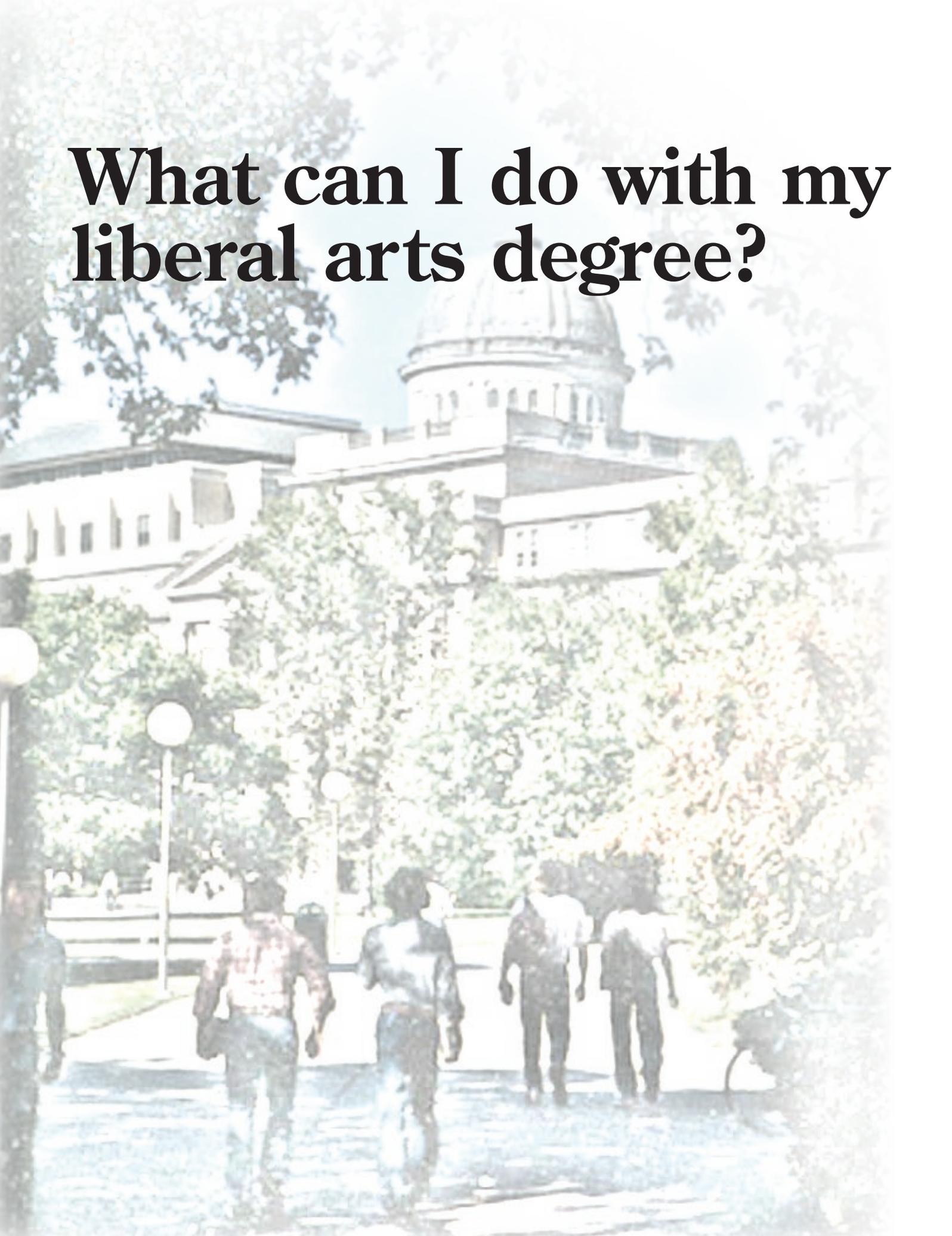


What can I do with my liberal arts degree?



“Help! I’m majoring in liberal arts!”

Don’t worry: Your liberal arts training is solid career preparation. Find out how your degree helps make you marketable.

“What are you going to do with a degree in *that*? Do you want to be a teacher?”

If you major in liberal arts, you probably hear questions like those. It can be challenging to explain how a degree in, say, philosophy or music will lead to a career. That’s particularly true if you don’t want to teach.

But there are probably more options than you realize, even if your career choices aren’t as apparent as those for students of nursing or engineering. Liberal arts majors have skills that are in demand—and they can qualify for many different kinds of jobs.

Surveys by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) show that most hiring managers care more about a job candidate’s skills than they do about a college major. And the skills employers say they want most in a candidate, such as communication and critical thinking, are precisely those for which liberal arts students are known.

That doesn’t mean the job search won’t take effort. As most jobseekers can attest, having a college degree doesn’t guarantee instant success in getting a job. And liberal arts graduates may need to be especially persistent.

Keep reading to learn about the advantages of having a liberal arts major. Then, get tips on how to focus your career goals and gain the skills you need to meet them. Finally, learn to market your unique liberal arts skills to find the job you want.

by
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Wanted: Liberal arts majors

Liberal arts students' employment and earnings have increased over time. (See the box on pages 6–7.) More liberal arts graduates are reporting employment that relates to their degree. And more recently, as table 1 shows, salary offers have risen for many liberal arts graduates.

Those who study liberal arts can pursue a range of careers. Most entry-level positions require people who can learn quickly and solve problems; the specifics are taught on the job. “A general college degree is the major entry-level credential you need,” says author and speaker Donald Asher. “Employers are looking for the skills a candidate has to offer.”

Experts say, and a 2007 NACE survey confirms, that the most important skill employers seek in job candidates is the ability to communicate effectively. Employers also look for a strong work ethic, teamwork, initiative, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving and

analytical abilities. These are the very kinds of abilities honed by coursework in the humanities and social sciences.

The same NACE survey shows that liberal arts graduates worked in a variety of industries, including retail trade and social assistance. And they worked in a range of career fields, from management to sales to graphic arts. (See table 2.)

Liberal arts majors who are passionate about their studies are at an advantage in the job market, experts say. Interest in the classroom often translates to eagerness in a job search and enthusiasm in an interview. And the ability to confidently articulate their ideas—a hallmark of liberal arts training—may be these jobseekers' best justification of all for having chosen their major.

Finding your niche

For many students, choosing a career path is the most difficult part of their college experi-

Table 1
Average starting salary offers for select liberal arts majors

Degree major	Average starting salary offer			
	2004	2005	2006	2007
Economics*	\$40,630	\$41,994	\$44,588	\$47,782
Political science/Government	32,296	32,985	33,094	35,261
History	30,344	31,739	33,071	35,092
Foreign languages and literature	32,495	33,038	32,394	34,057
Other social sciences, not including economics	31,698	31,621	32,134	33,881
Liberal arts and sciences (major)	29,713	32,725	31,774	32,169
Sociology	29,168	31,368	31,096	32,161
English language and literature/letters	31,113	31,451	31,385	31,924
Psychology	28,230	30,073	30,369	31,857
Other humanities	30,626	31,565	31,183	31,345

* Economics is classified as a business degree by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) and as a liberal arts degree by the National Center for Education Statistics. NACE began to classify it as a major separate from finance in 2007, so data from previous years may not be comparable.

Source: NACE Fall 2004, Fall 2005, Fall 2006, and Fall 2007 *Salary Surveys*

ence. The decision may be especially difficult for liberal arts majors, who often have many options beyond the obvious ones. An English major might decide to become an editor, for example, but he or she could also look at careers in business, sales, or graphic design.

Narrowing down what you want to do can be hard, but it is important not to procrastinate for too long. “It can be so easy for liberal arts students to put off that kind of decisionmaking,” says Robert Greensberg, former director of career services at the University of Tennessee, “usually because no one pushes them.” Echoes Susan Templeton, a senior career counselor at the University of Washington, “It’s never too early to think about what you want to do after college.”

You can begin finding your niche by considering your interests and skills, doing some research, and getting expert help.

Know thyself—and thy skills. When choosing a career, first consider your interests. Start with the courses you like. Suppose you are a history major. Think about what you enjoy most about that major. Is it the research? If so, you might want to explore research-intensive occupations, such as research assistant and paralegal. Do you like writing papers? If so, working as a reporter or technical writer might be a good match for your interest.

Each of your academic and extracurricular interests could take you in a different career direction. Figure out what you like doing, and then think about which occupations require those aptitudes. Some career fields might require additional training, but a liberal arts background provides a solid foundation on which to build.

Interest and skill assessments, many of which are offered as career counseling services, can help you to pinpoint your preferences. These exercises allow you to create a personal inventory for identifying strengths and weaknesses.

Preferences aside, you may have skills employers favor—even if you’re not aware that you have them. As a liberal arts student, you have technical qualifications related to your particular major. Learning what those

Table 2
Most common occupations,
by starting salary offers, of
liberal arts majors at graduation

Occupation	Average starting salary offer (all majors)
Management trainee, entry level	\$39,535
Sales, including associates	38,894
Design/Graphic arts	33,414
Teaching	33,261
Social work	27,037

Source: NACE Fall 2007 *Salary Survey*

qualifications are can prepare you for specific occupations.

Anthropology students, for example, know how to conduct ethnographic interviews and studies, skills that can aid them in marketing work when they analyze customers. English majors usually have editing and writing skills, which are essential for media, public relations, and publishing occupations. And geography majors are well suited to location-based urban planning. These are just a few of the many ways that liberal arts studies apply directly to occupations.

Some students dismiss these subject-specific careers because they think that there are too few jobs in them. But evidence suggests that each of the fields mentioned in the previous paragraph, while relatively small, is growing. For example, employment of market research analysts is projected to grow by 20 percent between 2006 and 2016 and to provide more than 62,900 job openings for workers new to those occupations. Communications and media jobs are expected to grow by 11 percent and provide 245,000 openings. And jobs in urban and regional planning are expected to grow by 15 percent and provide 14,900 openings.

Liberal arts students often end up broad-

ening their search when choosing work. In fact, solid training in liberal arts subjects is more of an asset than many students realize—but they soon discover its value when they start a job. Laura Denbow, a career counselor at Bucknell University, tells of a student client who majored in art history and landed a job in investment banking. When applying for the job, he highlighted the finance projects that he had worked on outside of his usual coursework. His unique perspective and skill set gave him an advantage over more occupationally specialized students. “Because of his liberal arts courses, he approached problems

at work differently,” says Denbow. “He also became the point person for all of the writing in his office.”

Research the job market. In addition to knowing your skills and preferences, you need information about career fields and employers to make a decision about what you want to do. But like many students, those who study liberal arts don’t always know enough about career possibilities and the business world.

Fortunately for liberal arts students, the research skills they use in their coursework are applicable to learning about businesses, too. Experts suggest that students approach

Data about liberal arts

Statistics from the Federal Government and private organizations show that people who major in liberal arts often do well in the job market. However, the data also show that these graduates have lower salaries and employment levels, on average, than people who majored in other subjects—at least at the start of their careers. Still, more students are finding work related to their liberal arts studies, and salaries have been increasing.

Employment. Employment rates of liberal arts graduates look promising. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that the percent of graduates who had full-time jobs 1 year after graduation increased across the board for all liberal arts specialties between 1975 and 2001. Although employment rates are still lower than those for workers with other majors, many of those not employed were in graduate or professional school.

Psychology majors have seen a rise in postgraduation employment of almost 20 percent, and humanities and social science majors have experienced similar increases (16 percent and 17 percent, respectively).

According to the NCES Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Survey, a substantial portion of liberal arts graduates

have reported that their jobs relate directly to their studies. In 2001, the most recent year for which data are available, 41 percent of humanities majors reported a direct link between their jobs and their majors 1 year after graduation. For psychology majors, it was 37 percent; for social science majors, 25 percent. The proportions are significantly higher than those from the mid-1990s. Moreover, 60 percent of liberal arts majors said they were in jobs that were the start of a career.

People who study liberal arts are usually happy with their choice, according to a 2003 NCES survey. Ten years after graduation, almost 60 percent of 1993 arts and humanities majors and almost 50 percent of social and behavioral science majors felt that their liberal arts courses were very important to their lives.

Earnings. Rising salaries for liberal arts graduates are part of a long-term trend. According to NCES, salaries for social science majors increased more than 62 percent from 1975 to 2001, and humanities majors saw an increase of almost 67 percent. These salaries compare well to those of engineering majors, which had an overall growth of 26 percent during the same period, and salaries of business or management majors, which grew by 29 percent.

career research as they would any other research project: by talking to specialists and reviewing news articles, journals, Web sites, and other resources.

Find help. Deciding on a career can be difficult, especially if you have a degree that doesn't point to a specific type of job. But getting help can make the process easier. Professionals in your college's career center can offer advice on topics ranging from choosing a career to negotiating a salary.

If you know which skills you want to use in a future job, you can consult a career counselor to help you match those skills with

potential jobs. And even if you have no ideas, career counselors can help you find direction. (To learn more about the workers who match jobseekers and employers, see "Employment matchmakers: Pairing people and work" elsewhere in this issue of the *Quarterly*.)

Nearly all career centers offer Internet resources that describe occupational choices by college major. But online research should be considered one of many steps. "Web sites are everywhere," says Denbow. "Sometimes, there is just too much information out there to make a good choice when you don't know what you're looking for."

Data from a 2007 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) survey show moderate increases for workers who studied a variety of liberal arts subjects. But the same survey shows that liberal arts graduates' starting salaries still lag behind those of people who majored in business or engineering.

Other studies suggest, however, that this salary gap decreases over the course of most people's careers. Salaries may start low, but they often catch up.

What are the "liberal arts"?

"Liberal arts" can mean different things to different people. Some use a broad definition

that often includes mathematics, basic sciences, and economics. Others refer more specifically to the humanities and social sciences. Examples of fields of study that are usually included in either definition are history, English literature, women's studies, anthropology, foreign languages, philosophy, and international relations.

The NCES definition classifies economics as a social science and one of the liberal arts; by contrast, NACE defines economics as a business discipline. The following table shows the number of degrees awarded in 2005–06 in each of several liberal arts subjects under the NCES definition:

Total, all degrees	1,582,839
Total, liberal arts degrees	392,294
Social sciences	142,456
Psychology	93,830
English language and literature/letters	58,736
Liberal arts and sciences, general studies	45,869
Foreign languages, literature, and linguistics	26,546
Philosophy and religious studies	14,724
Area, ethnic, cultural, and gender studies	10,133

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

To help sort out options, most centers provide a variety of services in addition to career counseling, including job fairs, internship placement, and resume workshops. The University of Washington, for example, hosts an annual career discovery week, inviting alumni to come and discuss their career paths.

And, say experts, students can reduce the pressure to decide their entire lives in college and instead plan only as far as a first job. Learning new skills and gaining experience in an entry-level job can help them figure out what they might like to do as a career. After all, a job can be a steppingstone; it needn't feel like a life sentence.

Developing job skills

You can begin to develop job skills while you're still in school, even if your courses seem to have little to do with your career goals. Get skills for your resume by molding your activities, including coursework and summer jobs, to fit the careers that interest you.

Coursework as resume builder. One way to boost your career readiness is to take a course or two in a different, more occupationally specific, subject. Doing so will help you see if you like the subject, and you'll also learn new skills and industry jargon. Some



liberal arts students even decide to earn another major, or pursue a minor, in a technical or business subject.

Some colleges and universities offer programs that connect liberal arts studies with real-world skills. Through these types of programs, liberal arts majors can develop skills, test career aspirations, and boost confidence.

New York University, for example, has a program that awards certificates in professional subjects but does not interfere with the core curriculum of liberal arts. An art history major might elect to earn a certificate in art appraisal, perhaps, or a French major could opt for a certificate in translation. Matthew Santirocco, dean of the university's College of Arts and Sciences, describes the program as an "add-on" to liberal arts studies.

Another way to demonstrate interest in a career unrelated to your major is to choose class projects that connect with that career. A sociology major might show interest in working with children, for example, by writing a paper on the impact of programs on disadvantaged youth. In addition to helping you gain a fundamental understanding of the field, projects like these make it easier for professors to provide recommendations to employers.

Internships and other experience. There is often no better way to develop your interest in a career than to get direct exposure to it. Obtaining relevant work experience can make all the difference in getting a job. And that's especially true if the job is in a field not directly related to your liberal arts major.

According to a 2006 NACE survey, many employers hire those who participate in their internship programs. As table 3 shows, the employers surveyed by NACE considered internships to be one of the most effective methods for finding new hires.

Internships give liberal arts majors a hands-on opportunity to test their career assumptions. Some students pursue an internship in an occupation they don't know much about as a way to discover their preferences. Even if they don't like the internship, the experience can help them know what to look for in a job after they graduate.

Table 3
Most and least popular recruiting methods, as reported by employers

<i>Most effective methods of recruiting</i>
On-campus visits
Internship through organization
Employee referrals
Co-op program through organization
Career or job fairs
<i>Least effective methods of recruiting</i>
Recruitment advertising, print
Internet banners
Newspaper advertising on campus and in local newspapers
Virtual career or job fairs
Video interviewing

Source: NACE *Job Outlook 2008*

Summer jobs, part-time jobs, and volunteer work can also be useful. Working not only provides exposure to the world of business or community service; it also gives students an opportunity to demonstrate reliability, timeliness, courteousness, and other traits important to employers. And building a reputation as a good worker or volunteer is helpful for jobseekers in need of references.

Advertising your skills

After developing skills, you need to advertise them with a resume. Highlight those parts of your liberal arts training that will appeal to would-be employers, and tailor your resume to the specific openings for which you apply.

You can use your resume to explain how your liberal arts major and your skills or experience relate to jobs. Starting off with a summary of qualifications, say experts, is a good way to include both transferable skills, such as writing ability, and more technical ones, such as knowledge of computers.

To market yourself well, create a master resume you can alter to fit each job you want.

“Resumes must be tweaked each time they are used,” says Asher. “It is about tailoring your background to the needs of the employer.” You may have to research the company advertising the job to learn which skills it is likely to be looking for. Then, you can emphasize on your resume how your qualifications relate to those skills.

Liberal arts majors might want to consider including extracurricular activities and academic projects on their resumes. Doing so helps them demonstrate that they understand the link between what they’ve done in school and what’s expected in the workplace. For a management trainee job, for example, liberal arts applicants should highlight courses or projects that required teamwork or public speaking.

Get out there!

When your resume is ready, you should use a variety of methods to distribute it. Common methods include networking, checking job postings, attending job fairs, and making “cold calls.”

Networking. Networking involves making work-related connections with people you already know and people you meet during your job search—and it is a powerful tool. “Networking is a major activity,” says Greensberg, “and it’s important to devote a lot of time to it.” For liberal arts graduates especially, networking may offer the chance to show people more directly how they qualify for a specific career.

In general, networking makes the job search more effective. “You have a better chance of getting a job if you have someone on the inside of a company give an employer your resume,” says Asher. “If it’s before they decide to post a vacancy to the public, you have cut down on your competition.”

Students should ask family, friends, and professors for help. Check with your career center or academic department for opportunities to speak with alumni. Joining professional associations and attending conferences are other good ways to expand your network.

Finding job postings. Job postings, including those in newspapers and professional publications and on the Internet, are another source of opportunity. But simply putting a resume on an Internet job bank is usually unsuccessful, in part because of the large number of applicants. Specialized sites devoted to one career might be more effective.

Visiting career fairs. Many employers recruit directly on campuses, and most employers attending career fairs are not recruiting students by specific degree or major subject. Learn about your school’s fairs, and ask which employers are expected to attend. Even if you go only to learn about a type of job, these events can help to sharpen your focus.

“Cold calling.” Some students looking for an internship or full-time job try “cold calling”: contacting employers they do not know and who have not advertised job openings. Experts suggest doing this only as a last resort. “Although it’s good to be creative in your job search,” says Santirocco, “it’s better to use and take advantage of any connections you have.”

Cold calling does work sometimes. But researching the best prospects first will increase your chances of success.

For more information

Career centers and libraries have many books and articles about choosing and pursuing a career. Some of these information sources focus on specific majors, others on the job search itself. Resources available in many centers and libraries include those from BLS.

One BLS resource is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, available in print and online at www.bls.gov/oco. The *Handbook* describes more than 300 occupations, many of which relate to the liberal arts. The *Handbook* explains job duties, education and training requirements, earnings, and job prospects.

Articles from the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* are another good resource. The following articles describe careers in occupations directly related to liberal arts fields:

- “Geography jobs,” www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2005/spring/art01.pdf

- “Helping charity work: Paid jobs in charitable nonprofits,” www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2001/Summer/art02.pdf

- “Interior designers: Sprucing up space,” www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2005/fall/art02.pdf

- “Policy analysts: Shaping society through research and problem-solving,” www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2007/spring/art03.pdf

The following articles offer general advice that is useful to a broad range of jobseekers, including liberal arts graduates:

- “Career myths and how to debunk them,” www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2005/fall/art01.pdf

- “Informational interviewing: Get the inside scoop on careers,” www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art03.pdf

- “Internships: Previewing a profession,” www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2006/summer/art02.pdf

- “Résumés, applications, and cover letters,” www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/1999/Summer/art01.pdf

Many colleges and universities offer help to both current students and alumni. You can also visit a One-Stop Career Center, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor. To find a local center, call toll free, 1 (877) 872-5627, or visit www.servicelocator.org.

To learn more about how skills and interest assessments are used in employment selection and career counseling, and to get test-taking tips and strategies, see “Tests and Other Assessments: Helping You Make Better Career Decisions,” published by O*Net and also available online at www.onetcenter.org/dl_files/testAsse.pdf. ∞∞∞

