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# Liberal-Arts Majors Have Plenty of Job Prospects, if They Have Some Specific Skills, Too

By Goldie Blumenstyk | JUNE 09, 2016

**T**he knock that liberal-arts graduates can have a tough time landing a first job is borne out by the data. Yet a new analysis of help-wanted postings for entry-level jobs suggests that those graduates can improve their job prospects markedly by acquiring a small level of proficiency in one of eight specific skill sets, such as social media or data analysis. In most cases, those skills increase salary prospects markedly, as well.

The analysis can help defuse the debate over the value of a liberal-arts education versus a career-focused one, says Matthew Sigelman, chief executive at the job-market-analytics company Burning Glass Technologies. The company undertook the analysis as part of its continuing study of the job market.

"Employers really value soft skills that are the bedrock of a liberal-arts education," he says. But many employers are also looking for applicants with additional, specific skills, such as knowledge of Java or other programming languages, or proficiency with graphic-design tools like InDesign or Adobe Creative Cloud. "It's not a matter of shutting down the classics department and turning it into a business degree," he says.

Burning Glass routinely data-mines three and a half million job ads a day. For this analysis, it combed through the wording of a year's worth of job ads for entry-level positions requiring a bachelor's degree, and it found about 955,000. It then dug deeper to see how many more positions might be "unlocked" for recent graduates if they had



The company identified skills in eight fields and then found an additional 863,000 entry-level jobs for graduates with skills in one or more of those fields. For example, the analysis found an additional 137,000 entry-level jobs for liberal-arts graduates who had data-analysis or management skills. It also found that such data-analysis jobs paid an average of \$12,700 above the average salary for jobs traditionally open to liberal-arts graduates without such skills.

Jobs for graduates with computer-programming skills paid nearly \$18,000 more, and there were nearly 53,000 more of them. (An illustration depicts the salary premiums and additional job prospects for the eight skill sets Burning Glass found.)

Collectively, the average salary for the jobs requiring additional technical skills was more than \$6,000 higher than the \$42,730 average for jobs traditionally open to liberal-arts majors. Skills in "sales" were the only ones that did not bring a quantifiable wage premium, but the analysis did find that graduates who had such skills would be qualified for nearly 568,000 additional job openings.

"The reality," says Mr. Sigelman, "is the liberal arts are really close" to what employers are looking for. The findings, he says, are an opportunity for traditional liberal-arts programs "to get past the lazy debate" over the value of such education.

In many cases, he says, students can acquire those additional skills through a modest amount of additional coursework in college, or by adding a minor, taking a summer course at a community college, watching video tutorials from a private online vendor like Pluralsight, or even working a stint in a part-time job like the Geek Squad of a Best Buy electronics store. "This is not hard-core stuff that's needed," he says.

*Goldie Blumenstyk writes about the intersection of business and higher education. Check out [www.goldieblumenstyk.com](http://www.goldieblumenstyk.com) for information on her new book about the higher-education crisis; follow her on Twitter @GoldieStandard; or email her at [goldie@chronicle.com](mailto:goldie@chronicle.com).*