

# Careers and the Liberal Arts Student



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## INSIGHT SERIES

In the *"Idea of a University"* (1858), John Henry Cardinal Newman proposed two main purposes associated with a liberal education. *"The purpose of a liberal education is to raise the intellectual tone of society and cultivate the public mind"* and *"...the result of a liberal education is adequate preparation to fill any position with credit and master any subject matter with facility."*

The thoughtful purposes of a liberal education written in 1858 are still true today. Leaders in business and government speak highly of students educated and grounded in the liberal tradition. We have traveled a long distance in 150 years and the world is a far different place. Like it or not, students of today are faced with a complex world and require an education and career mission worthy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We, in the business of higher education and career management, must pay close attention to several issues relative to liberal arts students of today.

**"Colleges must serve as a laboratory of learning and provide internships, externships, public services, part-time employment and other navigational beacons so students can test their goals."**

*-David Baumgartner, Ph.D.*

***Most Liberal Arts Students Have Little or No Knowledge of Work or the Workplace.*** A higher standard of living has changed the way students view work. Many students see or feel little urgency to obtain a job. Parental job duties have become more complex and fewer students understand exactly what their parents do on the job.

***Most Liberal Arts Students Have Many Interests and a Variety of Talents.*** Colleges need to give high priority to opportunities in which students can continue to grow intellectually and experientially. Additionally, students are generally curious and enjoy learning. They will actively seek out ways to enrich their college experience if these avenues are provided.

***Liberal Arts Students Generally Do Not Make Career Decisions When They Choose a Major.*** Alumni records demonstrate that there is little direct relationship between undergraduate majors and eventual careers of liberal arts graduates. The academic program has in its fabric courses that require the use of quantitative data and writing of research papers. It is not surprising that many liberal arts graduates go on to become leaders in business and industry.

***Liberal Arts Students Are Often Undecided About a Career During and Even After College.*** The decision to pursue a liberal arts education does not require making a career decision. Students tend to wait and postpone commitment to a specific career decision until they are more informed about the world of work. Colleges must serve as a laboratory of learning and provide internships, externships, public services, part-time employment and other navigational beacons so students can test their goals.

***It is Common for Liberal Arts Students Who Decide on a Career While in College to Question Their Decision and Even Change Their Goals as their Experience and Knowledge Grows.***

This, of course, is the beauty and purpose of the liberal arts—to expand horizons and interests. As students broaden their horizons because of coursework, classroom discussions and experiential opportunities through internships, public service and student employment, it is not uncommon to change or reaffirm career decisions.

***Employers Tend to Hire the Liberal Arts Graduates because of their Broad-Based Education and not for their specific job skills; therefore, students must articulate and transfer their skills and abilities into the workplace setting.*** By taking advantage of experiential education opportunities, students have an opportunity to test career goals and apply the skills and abilities they have learned from the classroom and their college experience.

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## Career Services and the Evolving Educational Mission

The old model of career development is not adequate for the liberal arts student operating in today's global economy. The educational mission of the career center has been re-tooled to help students build career strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The old career development model focused on career development theory and the notion that students remain full-time students until they become full-time employees, remaining in a single occupation until retirement. The entire career development process focused inward toward interests, values and aptitudes.

The new educational mission focuses both inward and outward. It expands the thinking from "who am I and where do I fit" to "how can I develop and use my skills and abilities to compete effectively, make necessary adjustments when necessary and be successful." The new educational mission focuses on increasing knowledge in five crucial areas: self, education, occupation, decision-making and employment.

### *Self Knowledge*

The main goal associated with self knowledge is to help students gather information about themselves as students and workers. Advisors help students focus inward on interests, work values and aptitudes. Students are encouraged to practice goal setting by answering the questions:

"Where are you going?"

"What are your aspirations?"

"How will you get there?"

### *Educational Knowledge*

Students need to be taught how to be competitive applicants for graduate and professional schools including grants and fellowships. Students must be shown the advantages to stretching themselves and becoming involved in the campus community, public services, travel abroad, internship opportunities and work experiences in general. By being involved, students can test career preferences and skills in light of their educational training and experience. Students will learn to ask the following questions:

"What educational programs will provide me with the knowledge and skills to be successful?"

"What degrees or credentials do I need in the career?"

"What knowledge will be in demand in the future?"

"What funding sources are available so I can reach my educational and career goals?"

"Is graduate school a possibility given my test scores?"

"How do I apply and write an essay for admission?"

### *Occupational Knowledge*

One main goal of career services is to assist students in gathering information about careers. Students want to learn about the nature of work and what tasks are involved in a particular career. Students will need to know the chances for promotion and the degree of expertise for entry to that field. Additionally, graduates always want to know the earning power of the position and the stress level. Every student needs assistance with developing a competitive resume and cover letter.

### *Decision-Making Knowledge*

Students should be taught how to make decisions and where to find the information to assist them in making those decisions. Students should be able to link self-knowledge with occupational knowledge. Students learn the positive and negative outcomes associated with the decisions they make.

### *Employment Knowledge*

Career advisors help students make the transition from student to intern and from intern to full-time employee. Students are taught to think analytically about their work experiences so they can identify career preferences and present themselves favorably to prospective employers. Students are also instructed on how to research employers and make the connections between the job description and their own individual achievements.

With this re-tooled approach to career development, university students will have the opportunities to position themselves for all that John Henry Cardinal Newman envisioned one and one-half centuries ago. A liberal education will contribute to society and to the "public mind" at a time when it is sorely needed.



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