

There Is Value in Liberal Arts Education, Educators Say

Professors at Virginia Tech seem to think a liberal arts education has never been more important in today's job market.

By: Maggie Hutzell

With significant attention on Virginia Tech's campus being paid to the value of an education within Science Technology Engineering and Math fields, also known as STEM, liberal arts students may find themselves asking: What is the value of their liberal arts education?

Professors representing the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, with a liberal arts focus, as well as the College of Science, with a vocational focus, agree that having a wide range of skills provided by a liberal arts education allows potential employees to stand out in the increasingly high competitive job market of today's society.

"I often tell students that, with a liberal arts education, they can learn the skills that will be valuable for the rest of their lives, not just their first job," Jennifer Barton, instructor in the Department of English said.

Employers complain that graduates lack communication, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, according to an online survey among employers, conducted in April 2013 on behalf of The Association of American Colleges and Universities by Hart Research Associates.

When read a description of a 21st century liberal education, a large majority of employers recognized its importance. Seventy-four percent would recommend this kind of education to a college-age student as the best way to prepare for success in today's global economy.

93 percent of employers agree, "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major." They readily identify the creative, communicative and problem-solving insight traditionally associated with liberal arts majors as some of the most valuable attributes of new hires.

"Preparing students for one specific job is risky," Hongxiao Zhu, assistant professor in the Department of Statistics, said. "That's why the College of Science is designed so students do not fit neatly within the parameters of a single academic environment, but instead are prepared to thrive in many environments."

Employers endorse a blended model of liberal and applied learning for successful careers. "A job will always be available to those individuals with a varied background," Barton said.

The survey also indicated that 67 percent of employers believe most college graduates have the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in entry-level positions, but only 44

percent think they have what is required for advancement and promotion to higher levels.

Any number of societal changes can shift which jobs are “hot” by the time a student has too narrowly prepared him or herself for a specific career. “Its hard to predict where the jobs will be by the time students graduate,” Zhu said. The best thing students can do to be hireable is to be very good at one thing but to not let it ultimately define them Zhu stated.