

Liberal arts skills give grads edge in life

APP
21.92.11

By Mary Beth Marklein
USA TODAY

A liberal arts education can provide a leg up in a down economy, a survey suggests.

Recent college graduates who as seniors scored highest on a standardized test to measure how well they think, reason and write — skills most associated with a liberal arts education — were far more likely to be better off financially than those who scored lowest, says the survey, released today by the Social Science Research Council, an independent organization.

It found that students who had mastered the ability to think critically, reason analytically and write effectively by their senior year were:

- ▶ Three times less likely to be unemployed than those who hadn't (3.1% vs. 9.6%).

- ▶ Half as likely to be living with their parents (18% vs. 35%).

- ▶ Less likely to have amassed credit card debt (37% vs. 51%).

Grades and other factors influence a student's chances of success, too. Graduates of colleges with tougher admissions standards tended to have fewer debts and were less likely to live with their parents, the study found.

A report this month by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, which studies the labor-market value of college degrees, found that recent graduates with a bachelor's degree in architecture had the highest average jobless rate (13.9%, vs. 8.9% for all recent college graduates). Education and health care majors had some of the lowest jobless rates.

The findings released today "show something new and different," says lead author Richard Arum, a New York University professor. "Students would do well to appreciate the extent to which their development of general skills, not just majors and institution attended, is related to successful adult transitions."

The study is based on surveys of 925 graduates who as college seniors had taken the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a test that aims to measure student learning. In addition to showing greater success financially, high-scorers were more likely to read the news and discuss politics and be living with or married to a romantic partner they met in college.

Richard Ekman of the Council of Independent Colleges, an association that encourages its member schools to assess student learning, says findings suggest that the Collegiate Learning Assessment is "a pretty good measure of how people are going to do in life."

Arum also cautions that the study doesn't speak to whether high-scorers picked up their skills in college. It follows up on research last year showing that 36% of college graduates showed few or no gains in learning between their freshman and senior years.