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## Author discusses his new book on why liberal arts majors make great employees

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Randall Stross earned his bachelor's degree from a liberal arts college and went on to earn a Ph.D. in Chinese history. His career path, however, does not fit the stereotype offered up regularly by politicians and pundits that those who focus on the liberal arts are destined for careers as baristas. He is a professor of business, teaching courses on business and society and on strategy at San Jose State University. And Stross believes a liberal arts education is the best preparation for college students -- including those who aspire to work in business and other areas seemingly far from the liberal arts.

He makes the case in *A Practical Education: Why Liberal Arts Majors Make Great Employees* <sup>[1]</sup> (Stanford University Press). In the book, Stross particularly focuses on the career success of humanities majors. Via email, he answered questions about his book and the state of the liberal arts.

### **Q: What prompted you to write this book?**

**A:** Once I arrived for the first day of kindergarten, I never left school. I went to Macalester College and received an outstanding education, double majoring in history and in Chinese and Japanese languages and cultures. But I knew I was headed to a Ph.D. program in modern Chinese history at Stanford and I never confronted the Great Unknown After Graduation. The book arises from my recent wish to learn about the experiences of those braver than me, who major in the liberal arts and with nothing more than a bachelor's degree in hand, head out in the marketplace. For this project, I selected graduates who had overcome a higher degree of difficulty in landing well than would economics majors: I ended up only looking at humanities majors, who had sought professional jobs outside of teaching and that had no visible connection to the content of the major. No English majors who ended up in corporate communications, for example. I sought out those like the religious studies major profiled in the first chapter, who would end up as a professional programmer and today is the chief executive of a cloud software company.

### **Q: Many admissions leaders at liberal arts colleges report increasing difficulty in making the case for the liberal arts. What is your advice for them?**

**A:** If it seems difficult to make the case now, imagine how difficult it would have been in the depths of the Great Depression, when the unemployment rate was 16 percent and headed for 24 percent and market demand for liberal arts majors had evaporated. The talk in the air was of the need for more vocational education. Yet William Tolley, in his inaugural address as the president of Allegheny College, did not falter. He made the case for a broad liberal education in 1931 whose contemporary relevance should hearten all of us who advocate for liberal education. "Specialists are needed in all vocations, but only as long as their vocations last, and vocations have a tendency now to disappear almost overnight," he observed. He reasoned that in an ever-changing world the broad knowledge covered at a liberal arts college is "the finest vocational training any school can offer." The argument is no less powerful today. But to make it seem well grounded, admissions leaders should have at their fingertips stories to share of graduates who left their schools with liberal arts majors and have gone on to interesting professional careers.

**Q: Politicians seem to love to bash the liberal arts, asking why various majors are needed. How should educators respond?**

**A:** Many politicians -- perhaps most politicians -- view the labor marketplace in terms defined entirely by "skills": employers need workers equipped with specific skills; students either arrive with those skills or lack those skills. This is new, historically speaking. In a bygone era, 60 years ago, many large corporations hired college graduates in bulk, paying little heed to their majors, and spent the first years training the new hires themselves. So the defense of the liberal arts today must be delivered using the vocabulary of "skills." Fortunately, conscientious students in the liberal arts can demonstrate great skill in many things: learning quickly, reading deeply, melding information from diverse sources smoothly, collaborating with others effectively, reasoning logically, writing clearly. I will resist the temptation to point out the apparent absence of these skills among those who are doing the bashing.

**Q: What information about career options should liberal arts colleges (or departments with liberal arts majors at institutions with a range of programs) provide?**

**A:** I've become convinced that conventional career counseling -- setting out the most traveled paths for a given major -- has not been particularly helpful to students. The well-trod destinations are obvious to students anyhow, and the opportunities that they remain unaware of are best uncovered by the students' own investigations in the real world. Career centers can best help by redoubling their efforts to enlist alumni to serve as peer counselors: current students listen to recent graduates with the greatest interest. In the book, I call attention to how a number of the students I followed found first jobs via connections that were not found through the career center, or even through roommates or the closest of friends, but from less than closest of friends. (This was nicely anticipated long ago in sociologist Mark Granovetter's "The Strength of Weak Ties" [2] published in 1973.) One student, a history major, would be most helped in landing a job at Google by a woman for whom she babysat.

**Q: Many employers say they care more about skills such as critical thinking, ability to work in a team, ability to write well, etc., more than a major. These factors should boost confidence in liberal arts study. Why hasn't that been the case?**

**A:** Chief executives tend to advocate for hiring graduates with the analytical and communication skills that a liberal education sharpens, but the managers or teams who make the actual hiring

decisions have in recent years sought instead something else, what they like to call the ability of a new hire “to hit the ground running.” This drastically shrinks the pool of prospective candidates. It’s also shortsighted in its failing to acknowledge the usefulness of having more people who, once they have learned what they need to about the particularities of an entry-level position, are going to be able to make more creative, or more clearly explained, contributions on day 180 compared to many of their running-on-day-one peers. I hope that the detailed stories of 10 humanities majors who were able to make outsize contributions in their first professional jobs will serve to nudge more hiring teams at other companies to expand their nets and give liberal arts majors the chance to show how quickly they can learn and what they then will be able to do.

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[1] <http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=26779>

[2] [https://sociology.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/the\\_strength\\_of\\_weak\\_ties\\_and\\_exch\\_w-gans.pdf](https://sociology.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/the_strength_of_weak_ties_and_exch_w-gans.pdf)

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