

WHAT TO DO WITH A "SOFT" DEGREE IN A HARD JOB MARKET

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Every year the students in Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Toronto organize a "career night" for the 60-odd undergraduates in the program. The evening aims to answer the question: What can one "do" with a B.A. in this field?

As program director, I described the job environment the students face on graduation and what they can do to prepare for it. Although the story I tell is in some ways a grim one, new graduates have more control over their destinies than they might think. The secrets of this control, however, are not entirely what they expect.

Outsiders probably roll their eyes when they hear of young people arriving on the job market with such a degree. How can anyone possibly expect to find a job with a background in such a "soft" field? Actually, there are a number of options they can pursue, such as a career in the foreign service; international or human-rights law; in the political-risk analysis departments of corporations that invest heavily overseas; or in one of the many non-governmental organizations working in human rights, Third World development, environmental protection or conflict resolution.

In general, though, an undergraduate degree of any kind is no longer a guarantee of a job. When my father graduated from university in the early 1950s, a B.A. or B.Sc. was a mark of considerable distinction and graduates found work easily. Today the identical degree is often just a starting point. While the probability of finding good work with an engineering degree may be higher than with one in, say, history, the job market is now so competitive that even computer-science graduates often find they need more training to enter the work force at the level they desire.

If an undergraduate degree is no longer a ticket to a good job, what is? Unfortunately, students still often assume that if they just "punch the right buttons" on their way through university, a career path will magically appear before them. Thus many aim for professional programs such as law, business, medicine, journalism and architecture. Yet even these fields are

becoming more restrictive and, in some cases, much less lucrative than they once were. Provinces are beginning to restrict the flow of graduates from medical schools because a glut of doctors is driving up medical insurance costs; MBAs are a dime a dozen now; and criminal lawyers are finding that cutbacks to legal aid payments are sharply reducing their standard of living.

Drawing on the writing of U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, I tell my students the stark reality about our emerging job market. As technologies of production change, the work force in our modern economy is bifurcating: One group I call "hamburger flippers," the other, "symbol analysts."

Modern technologies are ever more intelligent and they are working their way up the skills hierarchy. Jobs that require low or moderate skills are being eliminated at an astonishing rate as firms -- intent on maximizing profits -- replace labor with machines. Robots have replaced assembly-line workers on the factory floor; computerized answering devices have sharply reduced the number of directory-assistance operators in telephone companies; and word-processing technology has largely eliminated traditional secretarial jobs. Experts note that new information technologies are now threatening previously secure middle-management positions. The jobs that are left are increasingly low-paid service jobs in stores and restaurants, and high-paid knowledge-intensive jobs in the computer, business and consulting industries.

Needless to say, my students are alarmed by these changes in our economy, and they want to be on the right side of the jobs divide. Education is one prerequisite to success and I tell them they should expect to continue with their education after their undergraduate degrees. I do not necessarily mean formal, university-based education -- essential training can often be found through employers or personal study. But students must expect that if they are going to enter the high-end work force, and if they are going to stay there, they must work vigorously to stay as highly educated as possible throughout their careers.

Just as important, though, are characteristics of mind and personality. Students must develop, as well as they can, the mental agility that allows them to move rapidly from one problem or task to another, to change their frames of reference, and to apply

knowledge from radically different domains to practical problems. Employers are now looking for this kind of intellectual nimbleness and for keen, analytical problem-solving ability. The specific degree the recent graduate arrives with is not as important as his or her mental equipment. Can this person think well? Write well? Does he or she arrive with an entrenched, rigid perspective on the world or with the flexibility to produce novel solutions to rapidly changing problems?

This is why a Peace and Conflict degree actually serves students well as a starting point (and I emphasize "starting point") in their higher-education experience. The degree explicitly aims to give them the tools they need to think about and to solve problems in an interdisciplinary way. It draws from many different fields -- fields as diverse as economics, psychology and history -- and shows students how to bring ideas together from these disparate areas and apply them to practical problems, such as conflict resolution.

But in addition to intellectual agility, students need to exhibit one other characteristic: entrepreneurship. I tell my graduates that they will probably have at least half a dozen different jobs in their lives. Our economies are changing so rapidly that they must expect to move from one job to another regularly. The people who prosper in this turmoil will have the ability to identify new market niches and opportunities appropriate for their skills; and they will have the nerve to take risks to explore and exploit these opportunities once identified. We are seeing the emergence of an economic environment in which the winners are relentlessly entrepreneurial, forever on the edges of their seats, watching and waiting to seize new opportunities before others seize them. This story I tell my students is not a happy one. But there are identifiable factors that will greatly improve the likelihood of career success: continuous education, intellectual flexibility, and entrepreneurial zeal. As young people leave university, they should plan their futures with these three factors in mind.