

Tips for Turning A Liberal Arts Degree Into a Career in Business **by Dr. Gibbs Knotts**

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Just what are you going to do with that liberal arts degree? This is a common question facing liberal arts majors and a question that they need to be prepared to address. Fortunately, liberal arts majors have a number of options for meaningful, rewarding, and even financially lucrative careers. You probably know about opportunities in the public and nonprofit sectors but with hard work and careful planning, liberal arts majors can also have rewarding careers in the business arena.

Just ask Bob Thomas, a 1970 social sciences and history major from Western Carolina University. Mr. Thomas has had a long and distinguished career in business, and he is currently chief executive officer for EIS Incorporated, a company that sells process materials, production supplies, and industrial motor repair products. Mr. Thomas recently visited Western Carolina University and offered a number of important lessons for students who want to work in business.

First, liberal arts students should not be afraid to take courses in the College of Business. Classes in accounting and finance are particularly useful, and students would be well-served to learn to read financial statements. The ability to navigate a balance sheet and an income statement will help students be better prepared to speak the language of business.

A second way to increase your business IQ is to read popular business books. A quick look at the New York Times bestseller list for hardback business books includes a number of compelling reads for students aspiring to work in business. Examples include *Outliers*, by Malcolm Gladwell, a book that examines the factors that cause people to be successful and *The Accidental Billionaires*, by Ben Mezrich, an account of how two Harvard undergraduates created the social networking site Facebook.

Third, liberal arts majors might consider starting in the sales department. For many, sales jobs have a negative reputation, reminding people of a bad experience with a used car salesman. But, as Mr. Thomas points out, business-to-business sales is much different and can be a great way for new employees to develop an understanding of the company's core business. Successful salespersons also create value for the company and can often lead to management positions.

According to Mr. Thomas, anyone considering a career in business should be flexible and be prepared to roll with the punches. Corporate mergers, downsizing, and other unexpected events require that workers to be able to readjust and operate in new environments. Students should also remember to balance professional and personal obligations and always remember to keep your career in proper perspective.

Liberal arts majors can make a successful transition to the corporate world but they will need to take some extra steps to make themselves more competitive. In addition to the tips outlined above, liberal arts majors should emphasize the core communication skills they have learned during their time in college. The ability to analyze and the ability to communicate (both orally and in writing) will go a long way to a successful career in any sector of the economy.