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You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a "Useless" Liberal Arts Education (English Edition)

by George Anders

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54 Highlights

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Curiosity, creativity, and empathy aren't unruly traits that must be reined in to ensure success. Just the opposite. The human touch has never been more essential in the workplace than it is today. You don't have to mask your true identity to get paid for your strengths. You don't need to apologize for the supposedly impractical classes you took in college or the so-called soft skills you have acquired. The job market is quietly creating thousands of openings a week for people who can bring a humanist's grace to our rapidly evolving high-tech future.

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like the Raiser's Edge become booster packs for your brain. The list is endless. LinkedIn has become the professional equivalent of steroids for recruiters; LexisNexis does the same for lawyers; AutoCAD for industrial designers; Final

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Just as important, when unexpected change happens, you have the experience and the temperament to make the most of whatever comes next. As the philosophical writer Eric Hoffer once observed, "In times of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists."

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As the nineteenth-century British educator William Cory put it, the benefits of such an education consist of "the habit of attention... the art of expression... the art of assuming, at a moment's notice, a new intellectual position... the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts"—and even the willingness to accept that you might be wrong.

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as an erratic but diverse assortment of supplies and tools. At that point in the film, Watney starts to envision a way out, declaring: "I'm gonna have to science the shit out of this."

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Consider what happened when Steve Pearlstein, a professor of public affairs at George Mason University, invited honors students to read an eight-hundred-page biography of Andrew

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confines of high schools, colleges, and universities themselves. Think of Robin Williams's recklessly enthusiastic English instructor in *Dead Poets Society* or the mathematician

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When employers ask for critical-thinking skills, the term serves as shorthand for five crucial factors. These start with a confident willingness—perhaps even eagerness—to tackle uncharted areas where nobody knows the rules yet. You bring imagination to your job; you adapt well to new situations. Let's call this *Working on the Frontier*. Next on the list, well-honed analytic methods that make you good at *Finding Insights*. You thrive on spotting the less obvious answer. As you gain experience and rise in power, you will start synthesizing insights in ways that make you a trusted expert when complex decisions need to be made. Let's call this higher-level power *Choosing the Right Approach*. Finally, you understand group dynamics and other people's motivations in an unusually deep way. You're good at *Reading the Room*, and also at *Inspiring Others*.

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how to find a nugget of truth (or a dangerous lie) in a mountain of data. Let's take a closer look.

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gathering data, and defining your own reading list. No matter how narrow your immediate topic of interest may be, the deeper you go, the more you acquire the universally

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Practically every organization is wrestling with the information age's awkward disparity: too much data, not enough clarity.

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Can you build a team? Can you balance different perspectives and agendas? Can you understand the big picture? Can you manage through influence? Employers have been looking for these sorts of socially minded strengths since at least the 1930s. At first, this was an unambitious search, focused mostly on finding sales clerks with pleasant personalities. Not anymore. Financial giants such as BlackRock routinely cite team-building as a priority when hiring people for jobs paying a hundred thousand dollars a year or more. Leading Internet retailers such as eBay want candidates who know how to satisfy multiple agendas and still keep everything moving forward.

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Immerse yourself deeply in another culture, and a more compassionate self emerges. Kari Dallas visited Greece as a liberal arts undergraduate more than a decade ago, but she still remembers a shocking incident that occurred in a Greek town while she was walking through the city streets beside a classmate with intensely blue eyes. “A young girl stared in horror at those blue eyes and crossed herself,” Dallas recalled. “It was as if she had seen a devil.” It’s about digging into the way things are in a place, not just the way they seem.

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Your ability to tell a story—or win an argument—will win employers’ admiration.

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Rhetoric, as it happens, was one of antiquity’s original seven liberal arts. Mindful of that heritage, Dartmouth’s Paul Christesen asks undergraduates in the Greece study-abroad program to deliver a half-hour talk at some point summing up their backgrounds, interests, achievements, anxieties, and ambitions. There are no other rules. Preparing for these talks becomes a soul-searching exercise that students vividly remember a decade later. Some admit to imagining themselves being back in Greece again and again, revising their youthful remarks each year as they redefine who they’ve become and who they want to be.

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Right after college, I took an entry-level job at a big newspaper, copyediting minor news stories and writing headlines. My boss was a stocky, irritable man in his mid-forties who was consumed by the idea that Yale graduates enjoyed unimaginable career networks that he would never experience. Every few days, John would fulminate about the power of secret societies such as Skull and Bones. In his view, Yale’s clubby elite was capable of parking any of its members, no matter how dumb or lazy, into a job that paid vastly more than his or mine. All us younger fellows stifled our smiles when these outbursts began. Yet there was something genuinely distressing in his belief that he had gone to the wrong school and that nothing he ever did could make up for this failing.

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In the workplace, as in coastlines, the cycle keeps repeating itself. Millions of jobs barely known or inconceivable a generation or two ago have become mainstream norms. That’s true in medicine (as seen in the rise of everything from hip-replacement surgery to genetic counseling); it’s true in engineering (with examples ranging from mobile-app development to solar-cell design); and it’s true in all kinds of fields where a liberal arts perspective can be put to use. Even big companies stretch their ambitions in unexpected ways, creating fresh jobs in uncharted areas. Governments and nonprofits do as well. The result: Employers routinely insist they have no openings until they meet a promising candidate—like you. That’s when your energy and optimism reshape the day. New ideas take center stage. Moods brighten. Suddenly, doubt turns into belief; diffidence into action. Before long, someone utters the magic phrase: “What if we tried...” This chapter

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where they want to expand next without being able to articulate precisely what they want. It's an awkward fact of life that the best-organized employers usually aren't all that visionary—and the most visionary employers tend to be disorganized. So if you're hoping to land a job no one has ever held before, you probably will need to help create it yourself. All the same, those chaotic beginnings shouldn't distress you;

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filling. Then again, much of what happens in the world defies

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Banks, hotels, and car companies are huge users, eager to know what customers and employees think. Psychology professors are Qualtrics junkies, too. If you ever found yourself moving a ratings slider between one and seven to express your views, chances are you have filled out a Qualtrics survey.

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All told, about sixty-seven thousand web-development and web-design jobs come open each year, according to Burning Glass Technologies. Most of these positions are treated as computer-industry jobs by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, but the truth is, digital design relies at least as much on a person's aesthetic sense as on his or her technical knowledge. Pick up a basic grounding in industry tools, such as Adobe InDesign, Pixate, Sketch, Figma, Framer, or their successors. Beyond that, show up with nerve, a few ideas, and a willingness to learn fast. And once you get established, don't forget to trademark your own name.

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Diplomacy became a distant dream; heading straight into government lost its allure. She opted for an international relations major in college, now uncertain how she might apply it. Instead of being a means to an end, travel became an end in itself. Other classmates at Stanford dabbled in marijuana; she loaded up on anti-malaria medicines. In the spring of her junior year, she journeyed to South Africa to study whether crime rates in impoverished areas could be reduced by building social cohesion. To gather data, she plunged into a radically different culture. She learned some isiXhosa, a clicking language spoken by seven million South Africans. She and a research partner conducted sixty-two field interviews, building alliances with community guides, so they could be sure respondents were providing candid answers instead of saying whatever they thought might please foreigners.

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declared. "I'm a fast learner. I will put in the hours." That week, Douglas and Connolly shook hands on the new job; wikiHow was about to hire its first international project manager. Ironically, the job hadn't existed until this twenty-three-year-old walked in the door. For all of us who like adventure, there's nothing

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and choreographer Martha Graham described as the “divine dissatisfaction” of being an artist: the “blessed unrest that keeps

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unexpected settings—and how to connect with people profoundly unlike her. “I’ve ended up becoming a diplomat after all,” Connolly told me. “I figure out what different people want, and what they are capable of doing. I negotiate with them. If they’re older than me, I treat them with a hundred percent respect. But I’m also very clear about what

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In the late 1950s, the British scientist C. P. Snow wrote a landmark essay entitled “The Two Cultures” in which he argued that intellectual leadership in Western society was being split into two camps that couldn’t make sense of each other: physical scientists and literary intellectuals. Each group had a curious, distorted image of the other based on dangerous misinterpretations. People who understood the second law of thermodynamics had no idea what Shakespeare had to offer, and vice versa. “The degree of incomprehension on both sides is the kind of joke which has gone sour,” Snow declared. “If the scientists have the future in their bones, then the traditional culture responds by wishing the future did not exist.” One of the saving graces of the American educational system is that it keeps trying to bridge this gap. As a nation, we ask students to spend four years getting their undergraduate degrees (Britain does it in three) because we want everyone to try classes outside their specialties. We want engineers to read a few novels; we want poets to appreciate the natural beauty of numbers and equations too. If you are a science or engineering major with a fondness for liberal arts electives, you’ve prepared yourself well for this bridge-building role. If you’re a history or English major who doesn’t panic at the sight of a few numbers or formulas, you’re on track too. The growing popularity of interdisciplinary majors such as cognitive studies speaks to increased awareness on the parts of employers, students, and university faculty that graduates with multiple perspectives bring something extra to the job market. Count me in as a champion of almost any approach that helps span the two cultures. Right now, the job market lacks universal, easy-to-understand language that captures these multidimensional skills. As a result, the best opportunities for liberal arts graduates are likely to reside in jobs with awkward, long, and opaque titles. You might be trying to get hired as a partner advocate, a business-development manager, a relationship manager, or a customer-success specialist. Each organization has its own vocabulary. Linguistic reform is needed.

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trust.” Most business-minded discussions of blockchain are highly abstract, with hard-to-grasp allusions to greater transparency and security. Meeker keeps it real. “Let’s say you want to know with one hundred percent confidence that the salmon you are eating is actually organic,” he says. With blockchain, uncertainties vanish. The various people and businesses along your salmon-supply chain—the fishermen, shipping company, warehouse, and retailer—have a single view of where the fish has been on its way from the ocean to your plate.

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While numbers don't lie, they need to be interpreted—and that's where Henderson earns her keep. Porter Novelli's clients often want to enlist the paid support of a big-time social-media personality who can help generate excitement about a particular brand. In some categories, such as health care, that's easy to do. Star bloggers (or Tweeters) appreciate the extra cash and don't mind talking up a product that appeals to them anyway. In other categories, it's much harder to find the right boosters. Henderson frequently builds "influencer maps" that show the forty or so most active social-media personalities on a particular topic and give some guidance about which ones might be best suited for a client's cause.

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spent a year poring through the cryptic notebooks of social theorist George Simon, annotating and editing them as best he could. After that, O'Reilly embarked on a biography of Frank Herbert, author of the science-fiction classic *Dune*.

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more value than you capture," he tells me. If we want to know where that aphorism originated, he can help us trace it back to Diogenes.

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Yellow Pages were becoming as outdated as ditto

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business-to-consumer selling. As Stephanie Meyer, chief marketing officer at software maker Connecture, observes: "It can't be B-to-C; it has to be B-to-human, or B-to-me."

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gladly take cues from what everyone else is doing. If we hear laughter on the sound track of a TV show, we start laughing too. The desire to fit in is so strong that we leave donations even if we weren't amazed by the caliber of a street musician's performance; we join in the guffawing even if the comedy show's jokes weren't all that funny.

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businesses wanted to hear stories about similar enterprises that had bought Facebook advertising, they could make that happen too. Today, Facebook employs thousands of people in its advertising, marketing, sales, and business-development

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eudaemonia,

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coming up with unexpected solutions. There's an old saying you hear from entrepreneurs: "I had to start my own company, because I couldn't work for anyone else." That's still true

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Collins's own words, a liberal arts education "enables you to cite both Plato and Spider-Man in the same speech."

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organization might not be something that's been done before." Large-scale investing is where the cerebral types hang out. Professional investors read incessantly. They join organizations such as the Council on Foreign Relations, partly because they

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major, writing his senior thesis on "The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning." I tracked down a copy of the eighty-page tract, and it reveals early signs of his famously argumentative style. How do we know sugar dissolves in water? college

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Perhaps success just meant finding the right

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four core disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and math that make up the STEM fields. Now, says the company's chief information officer, Larry Quinlan, Deloitte prefers STEAM, in which A stands for the arts.

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picking up books like Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic's *Storytelling with Data* and saying: "We should be doing this!" Influential

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good ways to broaden your contacts. The simplest: read *Fast Company* magazine, which covers this sector with tremendous verve. The most ambitious: attend the annual Skoll World Forum, a gathering of social entrepreneurs that's

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how much you have read already, State's recruiters want to entice you with even more possibilities. Thus, a Suggested Reading List packed with sixty-eight books from every section of a big campus library's stacks is part of the application. Devour as many as you dare; in the Foreign Service, they all are appreciated. You'll be pointed toward geopolitical classics such as *Why Nations Fail*; *Guns, Germs, and Steel*; *Russia Since*

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economics, too, in the form of *Immigration Stories*, *Blink*, and *Psychology and Life*. And be mindful that living abroad

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island could help her, but with a single online request, she could become visible to as many as twelve thousand Reed alumni. She logged on to Switchboardhq.com, a student-and-alumni career networking site. There, she posted a three-paragraph plea that concluded: "If you've ever worked

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a bit of Kaori Freda in all of us. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, college graduates do the most job-hopping between ages twenty-two and twenty-eight (5.8 jobs on average). The comparable figures for people

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starting to change. Private colleges such as Oberlin, Reed, Mount Holyoke, and Amherst now realize that their most valuable alumni aren't always the ones writing the biggest checks. With the college-to-career pathway for liberal arts graduates in constant

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Take a close look at the college-major choices of students from underrepresented backgrounds, and you will find something surprising. Some 33 percent of first-generation college students choose a liberal arts major, according to a 2016 nationwide survey, compared with a national average of 30 percent. Psychology, in particular, exercises its strongest pull on undergraduates with lower-than-average family incomes. Each major is its own story, and English majors do tend to come from wealthier families. In general, though, if you've been told that a liberal arts education is a luxury only students from well-entrenched families can afford, you've been misinformed.

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A similar etymological argument is in play when we look at the word humanities. It derives from the Latin term *humanitas*, which, as writer Michael Lind points out, is meant to evoke "the higher, uniquely human faculties of the mind." Practical disciplines can prepare people for next month's work; the humanities are meant to prepare us for eternity.

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The central insight: At some point in the hiring process, seize an opportunity to explain what makes you tick. By sharing the key moments of your life, you transcend the drudgery of retracing the whats and whens of your résumé. You start to reveal the whys and hows in your life. You share the dreams that inspire you, the hardships you have overcome, or the parts of your personality that make you so distinctive. For the first time in the interviewing ritual, you and your interviewer will feel it's okay to let go of the standard script and just be human for a few minutes. You start to bring candor and trust into the conversation. If everything goes right, by the time you've finished sharing a bit of yourself, the person on the other side of the table will be thinking: We need to hire you. Your

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Come out of college with a liberal arts degree, and there's a good chance your first job will involve a brush with lean times. You won't be earning nearly as much as you'd like. You may be stuck, at least at first, in a job that doesn't do justice to your education or your potential. It's faintly reassuring to hear outsiders insist this is just a brief rite of passage. Large-scale studies (such as the PayScale and Hamilton Project data cited in chapter 7) keep demonstrating that salaries for liberal arts graduates rise briskly in the first decade after college. Today's humbling circumstances won't seem so bad if a wave of opportunity is coming your way, vindicating the importance of your college training and your "try anything" mind-set.

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The challenge is especially intense if you are the liberal arts go-getter who started out with an unconscionably low salary and now is rising rapidly in terms of job responsibilities, output, and caliber of work. You're still underpaid. You should be getting hefty raises to bring your pay in line with industry norms. Unfortunately, most corporations address such inequities quite languidly, if at all. The ugly truth is that managers' own metrics tend to reward them for keeping costs down and productivity high. From afar, the injustice of your situation resembles good management. The remedy, of course, is to ask for a raise anyway. Take a tip from Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg, who, in her book *Lean In*, offers a five-step approach to getting better pay without seeming self-serving. She wrote for a primarily female audience, but her advice transcends gender. Cite other people's comments about your effectiveness. Remind your bosses of the gap between your current pay and industry pay norms. Let go of any bitterness about your treatment (at least for the moment), and look for ways to portray yourself, your manager, and your organization as a harmonious trio destined to promote one another's best interests. I've got two more points to add. First, start the pay conversation a little earlier than you think you should. Research shows that male/female disparities in pay can be attributed in part to the fact that men ask for raises more often—and more bluntly. Even if managers reply, "We're sympathetic; we just can't do anything right away," that can be a useful first step. Begin your hunt for a raise when a few months of corporate inertia about the decision won't infuriate you. Finally, muster as much confidence as you can. If the strains of being judged by a wary boss seem unbearable, imagine that the real you is staying at home today, reading a book in a cozy armchair. The person doing the negotiating is your doppelgänger, equipped with a dossier that explains why you deserve a raise. Let this sci-fi clone do the hard work. He or she is an animated advocate on a simple mission: to champion your ingenuity, your hard work, and your impact.

If you chose the liberal arts track at a big university, you're in good company. Bolster your defense/rebuttal with data from this Brigham Young University presentation, which shows how English majors, history majors, et cetera establish strong careers in a wide range of fields: <http://humanitiespathways.byu.edu/>. If you opted for a small liberal arts college, Cereus Data has compiled a remarkable run of data, going back to 1935, showing how Williams College graduates with various different majors find their careers. The circular displays and multicolored palettes create beautiful swirling patterns that look a bit like maypoles in mid-dance. A link is here: web.williams.edu/mathematics/devadoss/careerpath.html. If you want evidence that a liberal arts degree can lead to strong midcareer incomes even if the first few years after graduation are bumpy, three national sources stand out. Data from the Association of American Colleges and Universities is here: www.aacu.org/nchems-report. Information from the Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project is here: www.hamiltonproject.org/charts/career_earnings_by_college_major/. Also useful is the biennial college salary report compiled by PayScale, a Seattle labor-data company; it can be found here: www.payscale.com/college-salary-report/degrees-and-majors-lifetime-earnings.
