

Hunting for Soft Skills, Companies Scoop Up English Majors

By

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Heads up, business majors: Employers are newly hot on the trail of hires with liberal arts and humanities degrees.

Class of 2015 graduates from those disciplines are employed at higher rates than their cohorts in the class of 2014, and starting salaries rose significantly, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers' annual [first-destination survey](#) of recent graduates in the workforce.

Degree holders in area studies—majors like Latin American Studies and Gender Studies—logged the largest gains in full-time employment and pay, with average starting salaries rising 26% to \$43,524 for the class of 2015, compared with the previous year's graduates. Language studies posted the second-highest salary gains.

Though area studies majors comprise less than 1% of all graduates in the survey, the pay numbers show employers are seeking hires with communication skills and comfort in multicultural environments, said Edwin Koc, NACE's director of research, public policy and legislative affairs.

Overall, pay for liberal arts graduates rose sharply for the class of 2015, moving closer to business graduates' starting pay, according to Mr. Koc.

"I'll be interested to see if it's a one-year quirk or whether it continues to boom in that direction," he said.

Those with degrees in English and in foreign languages also brought home bigger paychecks, with starting salaries rising 14.3% and 13.6%, respectively.

Behind the numbers is a growing desire among employers for hires with strong communication skills, said Mr. Koc. After complaining that new hires' soft skills are not up to par, "employers may be reconsidering how they're approaching recruiting college graduates, and may not be so focused on hiring a particular major," he said.

Computer-science graduates posted the highest starting salaries in the survey, reporting an average of \$69,214. They unseated petroleum engineering majors, who usually top starting-salary rankings but have dipped amid the energy-industry crisis.

Not all liberal arts majors are enjoying boom times. History majors' starting pay rose 3.7% year-over-year, and visual and performing arts majors were the sole group of humanities students for whom employment declined, with 2.3% fewer graduates employed six months after graduation.

NACE collected employment and salary information from 279 U.S. colleges and universities and 244,000 bachelor's degree graduates. Overall, more than 80% of 2015 bachelor's degree holders were employed or in graduate school within six months of graduation, according to NACE.

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