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Staying Afloat in a Difficult Economy

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Staying afloat in a difficult economy

You are the model student. You have studied tirelessly through years of late-night academic marathons. You have earned good grades and received recognition from your peers and mentors. Perhaps you play sports and belong to many extracurricular clubs and associations. At some point, you have traveled the world to broaden your horizons and contemplate new ideas. You followed the advice of your parents and did all the things that should, in theory, lead to success after graduation. So after all this, what happens when things don't go according to plan?

In recent years, many Linfield students have received their diplomas and walked into a professional world that is not at all what they expected. During this unprecedented economic downturn, we have been forced to question the narrative we've been told since our youth: Get good grades, go to college and stroll into gainful employment. Unfortunately, this rosy scenario is becoming less common. For some, it may even seem like a thing of the past – an opportunity afforded to a dwindling number of students in an ever more competitive world.

While the current job market may be dismal, rest assured, there is hope. I have experienced setbacks due to the recession, but the solid foundation of a liberal arts education has helped me through every stage of my early career and will continue to do so as I move further through uncharted territory.

Since graduating in 2008, I have worked a handful of jobs in seemingly disparate fields which have exposed me to a wide range of experiences. I got my start in fairly typical fashion by interning at a Portland marketing agency, which put my marketing degree to use and taught me a great deal about the industry. While my contribution there was well received, a restructuring of the firm led to the elimination of my position.

This was a huge setback for me. But amid the fear and anxiety, I gathered my wits and realized something reassuring. The cross-disciplinary nature of my Linfield education had given me a wealth of core competencies on which I could rely. I felt confident that my job search would not be restricted to the same position or even the same industry as before. I am not just a marketer. I can communicate effectively, solve problems efficiently and produce compelling ideas.

In the summer of 2008, I used those strengths to get involved in politics for the first time. I landed a management position at a grassroots fundraising firm working on behalf of the Democratic National Committee. The final six months of the presidential election were exhilarating, and I took great joy in knowing that I had turned a setback into an unexpected opportunity. Knowing that I would not continue political work after the election, I used my daily campaigning efforts to

network myself into a more permanent position at a national nonprofit, the YWCA.

I considered my new role as communications specialist a significant step forward. This was a job that allowed me to apply my business acumen while working on projects that I cared about personally. I was in it for the long haul. Or so I thought. In the spring of 2009, during the height of the recession, the YWCA responded as many other nonprofits did by cutting programs and eliminating staff. Once again, my position was cut.

Though I was devastated at the time, it would be months before I fully realized the gravity of my situation. With businesses shedding more and more jobs every day, it was increasingly difficult to find work, regardless of how motivated and qualified I was. I spent the better part of a year working temporary jobs just to get by. But even during that time, I considered my liberal arts background a competitive advantage.

I've met many students from big universities who have suffered for choosing a major which limits their options in the current job market. Perhaps they pursued an occupation that was hit hard, and because their skills are not widely applicable, they feel trapped. A liberal arts college is the antithesis of this narrow view of education. Regardless of their major at Linfield, students leave with general intellectual capacities that reach across many academic disciplines.

Once again, I fell back on my ability to be professionally nimble. I eventually started working with Portland Public Schools as a para-educator, someone who provides added classroom support to those with special needs. While this job is not my intended career track, it allows me to stay afloat in a struggling economy, and grants me the freedom to plan my next move.

My passion – the career I have been working toward in recent months – is sustainable energy. In the long run, sustainability could be just one of many trial careers, but in this moment, I am resolved. Every misstep or setback in the last two and a half years has taught me something valuable about the economy, the world and myself. By reflecting on these lessons, I believe I have found my new sense of direction.

In this economy, many Linfield graduates may be in for a struggle. Fortunately though, struggle has a brilliant way of defining a person. Many who go through this phase of post-college life come out more focused and disciplined toward their ultimate goal. A liberal arts education allows us to stay nimble in a world that continues to shift. I, too, will keep shifting. 🌱

– Brice Lang '08

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