

Why a Liberal Education Creates Great Entrepreneurs

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When then-Apple CEO Steve Jobs introduced the iPad 2 in March 2011, the device and its characteristics weren't the only things dominating the news cycle. In fact, [one particular quote from Jobs' speech](#) proved to be somewhat controversial. "It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough," he said. "It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing, and nowhere is that more true than in these post-PC devices."

Jobs' declaration that Apple's innovations drew inspiration from the liberal arts and humanities spawned plenty of [passionate debates](#) in the press, mainly because this belief ran counter to the theory that tech entrepreneurship stems from a business or engineering background. More and more, there are good arguments for why a liberal education--a broad definition encompassing everything from history, literature and languages to mathematics, science and psychology--creates great entrepreneurs. Based on core aspects of a [liberal education](#) as put forth by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, here's why these students can thrive in entrepreneurship.

- **"Liberal education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity and change."**

Few things are more uncertain than an entrepreneurial endeavor. It's why so many companies pivot, for starters, or shift focus after inadvertently finding a better direction. But scientists are also used to switching gears after an experiment might not produce data to support a hypothesis, and some of the most disruptive [scientific discoveries](#)--including penicillin and x-rays--occurred accidentally.

In addition, taking a kernel of an idea and making it a reality requires both abstract and analytical thinking--two things stressed in the humanities. Grinnell College graduate Hilary Mason is a self-described practitioner within the "data science" movement, which she says is "fundamentally about learning about human behavior from the data exhaust that we generate." She's applying this in her role as chief scientist at URL-shortening website bitly.com. "I'm a huge fan of the liberal arts approach of teaching you to think, analyze, and communicate, then sending you out into the world to cause trouble," [Mason told *The Grinnell Magazine*](#). "My Grinnell education didn't prepare me directly for the work that I'm doing, but it did give me the tools that I needed to focus my curiosity."

- **"It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest."**

Entrepreneurs need to be aware and attuned to the world around them. The premise of a liberal education is based on a well-rounded curriculum that exposes people to many different areas of study, ensuring they can learn about (and be open to) new ideas. However, being required to hone in on a more specific aspect helps teach students to focus and become an expert on a single topic--useful skills as well for tech entrepreneurs, who have to be vigilant about keeping up with advancements and competition within their chosen sector.

Such foresight proved valuable to [DecisionDesk](#) CEO and Co-Founder John Knific, who studied music and biology at Cleveland's Case Western Reserve University. His company's initial concept was to be an online network for creative-minded students to post and share video portfolios. But after finding that colleges increasingly needed a way to streamline their admissions process if a video audition or other creative portfolio was required, DecisionDesk pivoted. The Cleveland-based startup now provides a cloud-based applicant tracker system to over 100 organizations worldwide. "Originally, a vision for this company was a product," Knific says. "The vision for our company now is being the leader in admissions in higher education. We're driven more by the marketplace as opposed to this concept of a cool product."

- **"A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills."**

A liberal education dovetails neatly with social entrepreneurship, a category whose [primary focus](#) is to "[identify and solve] social problems on a large scale" and "advance sustainable solutions that create social value." This education's emphasis on communication also aligns well with vital skills entrepreneurs need--such as being able to craft a concise elevator pitch, or be able to explain to investors what their product, service or idea is or does.

However, entrepreneurs of all stripes need critical thinking skills and the willingness to question the status quo. Those qualities stood out to Sean Marsh, a Bowdoin College graduate who did some research and discovered that fellow alums of the Maine liberal arts school had founded tech companies worth sizable amounts of money. "This data supports a long held intuition that successful entrepreneurs have the ability to think in dynamic and non-linear ways and then to aggressively challenge conventional wisdom in pursuit of an innovative endeavor," he [wrote on VentureFizz](#).

- **"[A liberal education helps students develop] a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings."**

Innovation doesn't happen in a vacuum--and neither should entrepreneurship. [Put nicely by Mary Godwyn](#): "The liberal arts and entrepreneurship share the same critical, forward-thinking orientation: They involve the study and analysis of what is (for example, the current state of the economy, social justice, citizenship and community affairs, business

environments, and public and private needs) and, by identifying and evaluating opportunities for improvement, consciously contribute to what will be."

Now, none of this is meant to diminish the value of engineering and other technical or business disciplines that could be quite instrumental in entrepreneurial ventures; their value is unquestionable. [As we've discussed before in this space](#), education--whether liberal, business or even as part of a formal entrepreneurship program--helps students develop the traits and qualities that make for a successful entrepreneur. Regardless of a student's background, however, ideas (and enthusiasm for those ideas) trump all. When faced with a new venture, I'm always asking myself, can I connect to the idea? Does it seem truly breakthrough? Most importantly, can I get caught up in the entrepreneur's passion for it? The latter is especially important to [Cleveland Whiskey](#) CEO Tom Lix, who teaches entrepreneurship at a Northeast Ohio's Lake Erie College. "I just think, 'Follow your passion,'" he says. "You've got to be excited about it. If you're not excited about it, it doesn't matter that it's a great idea."

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