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A Liberal Arts Résumé

Colby alumni find their education invaluable in the business world

By Gerry Boyle '78 Illustration By Leo Pando

The morning rush was on at Naples 45, a bustling restaurant in the MetLife Building in mid-town Manhattan, as men and women in suits greeted each other and quickly got down to their breakfast-meeting business. At a booth near the restaurant's Park Avenue entrance Robert Underhill '78 was talking intently.

Underhill is executive vice president and co-head of the Capital Transactions Group of the national real estate investment firm Shorenstein Company, L.P. Working from an office 20 stories above the restaurant, he is responsible for "sourcing, underwriting, negotiating and closing capital transactions nationwide." Translation: buying and selling \$100-million-plus skyscrapers.

But that morning Underhill wasn't talking about multi-million-dollar deals. He was talking about writing—concise writing that conveys ideas clearly. "People say to me, 'What were you, an English major?'" Underhill said. "Because I say to them, 'You can't write that. That's atrocious.'"

He wasn't an English major. He majored in economics but also studied chemistry and went on to get his M.B.A. at Northwestern University. But Underhill has vivid memories of his initial conference freshman year with his professor in English composition, R. Mark Benbow. Bearded and austere, Benbow looked up from Underhill's first attempt at an essay and said, "Is English your native language?" It was, and Underhill, only momentarily stunned, redoubled his efforts at writing that year, under Benbow's tutelage. Now, after more than 20 years in the real-estate investment business, including stints in Chicago and London, it's Underhill who stresses to colleagues the importance of good writing in their work. "They might say, 'That's not important,' but it is important," he said. "It's how you convey your intelligence."

The preceding anecdote might state the obvious: you go to college to learn to be a better writer, thinker, problem solver. Later the experience, knowledge and problem-solving skills are brought to bear no matter what career you choose.

As news of alumni filters back to Mayflower Hill, from Wall Street or Silicon Valley, the number and variety of business careers that have followed four years at Colby is striking. What follows is an entirely unscientific sampling of Colbians in business. One year they're studying Melville and the next . . .

“Everybody always said it was the most useless major,” said Sean Duffy ’83, who double majored in English and psychology before embarking on a career in advertising. “But it teaches you how to think. And being able to think in business is the most important thing.”

It has been for Duffy, who, leaving Colby with sheaves of short stories in his portfolio, landed a job as an advertising copywriter in Boston. Three years later, an extended backpacking trip in Europe prompted him to circulate his résumé in London. A U.K. agency promptly hired him—for its San Francisco office. In 1991, a Swedish girlfriend and the percolating possibilities of the European Union led him to give Europe another try, and Duffy & Co. was born.

The success of that venture led to the opening two years ago of The Duffy Agency in Malmö, Sweden, with a second office just opened in Berlin. Duffy has worked on campaigns for Saab, Volvo, Absolut and other Swedish companies and now specializes in “global brand building” for clients on both sides of the Atlantic. “It’s fascinating because you never know what your client is going to be up to,” he said. “That’s where the liberal arts really comes in.”

Duffy’s early pre-med plans gave him a biology background that has come in handy working with a client that makes electro-muscular stimulation equipment. His ability to shoulder a six-course workload at Colby prepared him well for the responsibilities of running his own business. A psychology major provided a foundation for working in a field that centers on anticipating consumers’ reactions to words, images and colors.

And, of course, his love of Shakespeare is undiminished.

In only one way has Duffy’s liberal arts background let him down. “I suppose if I had been a business major I wouldn’t have started an agency on the eve of the biggest advertising recession in history,” he said. He laughed and then noted that 10 of his agency’s dozen or so competitors have closed in the past two years. The business run by the guy with the English degree is thriving. “I truly think that



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the education I had has had a lot to do with the way things have gone,” Duffy said.

For others, the connection between education and a career in business has been more direct.

Deborah Wathen Finn ’74 was a government major who, at the suggestion of her mentor, Professor Gunter Weisberg, went on to earn a graduate degree in political science at Northern Illinois University. Wathen Finn planned to go into public service and landed as the executive assistant to the commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Transportation. The New Jersey DOT was embroiled in a marathon lobbying campaign to establish NJ Transit.

Wathen Finn jumped right in.

“It was all the things that I learned in Sandy Maisel’s class,” she said. “All the political science theory about how you create a constituency. . . . And I helped get something done that hadn’t been done in ten years.”

Wathen Finn went on to management posts at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and headed rail operations at NJ Transit. Now as vice president at HNTB, an

architectural engineering firm that specializes in public transportation projects, Wathen Finn oversees the company’s New York City office and the 80-plus employees there.

Her days are spent tracking projects that include airport expansions (the Bradley International Airport terminal in Hartford, Conn.) and major bridge construction (her company did the Charles River bridge project in Boston). With no engineering or architectural degree, she relies on the communication skills of her colleagues and her own analytical abilities. “It’s all critical thinking,” Wathen Finn said. “Why is this project one that we’re positioned well to win? Why should we go for it?”

Once won, the projects sometimes involve issues that are emotionally charged as well. HNTB is involved in the reconstruction of the PATH train system that was destroyed in the World Trade

Center attack—a project that goes beyond tracks and tunnels. The day after she spoke to Colby Wathen Finn was scheduled to inspect office space as HNTB considered a move downtown as part of a post-September 11 revitalization movement. “It’s really about the quality of life and how lower Manhattan is going to look in the next century,” Wathen Finn said.

That planned career in public policy? Wathen Finn found it in the business world.

So did Joe Bergera ’86, who majored in government and was passionate in his Colby years about economic development. He went on to earn both an M.B.A. and a master’s degree in public policy at the University of Chicago, but his career has been all private sector.

Last spring Bergera was named vice president of worldwide marketing for InfoVista, a company that provides service-management software to companies that include Cingular, British Telecom, Nestlé, Shell and Banque de France, among many others. A press release announcing Bergera’s appointment said he would be “responsible for the company’s global marketing program,

including strategic marketing, product marketing, channel marketing, marketing communications, direct marketing and electronic marketing.” His résumé includes stints at Astrolink, a broadband telecommunications firm, and at MicroStrategy, Inc., where he directed a new global marketing program that helped the company’s revenues jump 50 percent.

And Cal Mackenzie (The Goldfarb Family Distinguished Professor of American Government) helped prepare Bergera for this?

Most certainly, Bergera says from the company’s sleekly modern U.S. offices near Washington’s Dulles International Airport. His undergraduate education prepared him for a career spent tackling problems that don’t appear in any text and for which there often is no precise precedent. “Almost all of the things we struggle with are brand-new challenges,” Bergera said of his work on tech-biz frontiers. And with his liberal arts background, he isn’t the exception. Bergera says many peers with straight finance or engineering backgrounds have an early advantage, but those with liberal arts degrees tend to rise quickly once they reach the level where their work becomes more conceptual and requires them to “look across functions.”

That big-picture perspective comes from knowledge drawn from different academic areas, from hard science to anthropology, geography to literature. “People with a liberal arts degree who make it to the next level—after five or ten years in an organization, you are starting to see that they tend to come up with the most innovative ideas and provide the leadership,” Bergera said. “The people who succeed tend to succeed in a really big way.”

Leslie Kaplan ’81 did that, carving out a career in advertising that included management positions at the renowned agencies Ogilvy & Mather and Hill Holliday, where she was executive vice president—and at that time the only woman at the executive vice president level at the company.

Kaplan, who recently moved to the Boston office of the VIA Group, a smaller independent firm, attributes her success to hard work and communication skills, honed at least partly in the small and intensely interactive community on Mayflower Hill. “You’re selling people and talent” as an advertising executive, she said. “You’re not selling widgets. Having the

ability to communicate with different types of people and having exposure to a lot of different subjects. And following it all with common sense. The more you understand people, the better off you are.”

Understanding people? Could something seemingly that simple be an essential skill in the corporate world?

Consider the thoughts of Professor Randy Nelson (Douglas Professor of Economics and Finance, chair of administrative science), who gives Colby students from various disciplines a foundation in business.

Over a Coke at the Spa one recent day, Nelson reeled off a long and seemingly open-ended list of his students who have gone on to success in finance. One recent graduate now works with an associate of Warren Buffet. Another is a rising star at Goldman Sachs. Several are at Cambridge Associates, the Boston financial consultants. Among them are M.B.A.’s from Stanford, Tuck and Wharton.

Some were economics majors; others studied history. One was a biology major and now helps manage the endowment of the University of Michigan.

While Colby isn’t a traditional “target school” for Wall Street recruiters, Nelson and others do their best to get their students in the door for interviews that will lead to that first job. “Once they get that opportunity, they rarely blow it,” he said.

In addition to the ability to think critically, and to have a broad body of knowledge, the business world wants something else that Nelson says his students have had. “They’re very smart, but they also have good personalities,” he said. “That’s the one thing that I’ve learned never to downplay—the importance of people skills.”

Though he may not have been thinking of Wall Street when he addressed first-year students in September, President William Adams did address the importance of civility in intellectual debate and discourse at Colby.

“We have to have . . . a respect and tolerance for individuals, not simply in the way in which they are like us but most especially in the ways they are not like us,” he said. “Elemental to civility is the notion that it is basically about communication.”

In the business world, where teams and departments often are made up of people from very different backgrounds, civility may

be a cornerstone of the foundation a liberal arts education provides. Because, as Nelson plainly puts it, Colby liberal arts graduates tend to get along with others. “It’s nice to be with someone you actually like, if you’re talking twelve-hour days,” he said. “I think our students do well in that area.”

Diana Herrmann ’80 doesn’t think so. She knows.

Herrmann is president and chief operating officer of the Aquila Management Corporation, which manages several affiliated municipal bond funds with total assets of \$3.5 billion.

The same morning that Underhill, the real estate executive, was talking about writing, Herrmann had just returned to her Madison Avenue office from a business trip to Hawaii, where she addressed a meeting of shareholders in one of her company’s bond funds.

It was one of many shareholder presentations Herrmann has given in states where her company operates. With a thousand or more shareholders in the audience, it is Herrmann herself who reports on fund performance and answers shareholders’ questions. “You’re there as a resource,” she said. “You want to make them feel comfortable.”

Herrmann studied art and human development at Colby and now, though she’s working in finance, says the majority of her job is people management, whether it be with employees or any of the 35 different Aquila board members around the country. The well she draws from? Psychology, sociology and philosophy, she said.

Now Herrmann tracks trends in the investment market, studies changes in regulatory laws, considers the ethical issues that have emerged in business in recent years, considers company graphics and its Web site and works with employees and board members.

It was this, the business world, that she was headed for, even as she studied human development at Colby. “Like it or not, it’s business that makes the world go ’round,” she said.

And the liberal arts—could it be driving business?

At Shorenstein Company, Bob Underhill paused and considered the educational backgrounds of the colleagues who work in his office. “Going down the hall,” he said. “Let’s see. Williams, Georgetown, University of Richmond, Harvard. It’s all liberal arts.”