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Why It Pays to Be a Math Geek

By Laura Morsch, CareerBuilder.com writer

Surviving those advanced integral calculus lectures and organic chemistry labs meant downing gallons of coffee, but that math- or science-related major might just be worth it – in terms of job outlook and high starting pay, that is.

College students graduating in 2004-05 with a math- or science-related degree are likely to earn significantly higher starting pay than their peers in liberal arts disciplines, according to a spring salary survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).

According to the survey, chemical engineering students graduating in 2005 reported snagging average offers of nearly \$54,300. Computer science grads' job offers averaged about \$51,300. Accounting grads got offers of about \$43,800, and economics/finance majors' offers averaged roughly \$42,800.

By contrast, liberal arts graduates reported

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average offers of \$30,300.

It gets even better for numerically savvy graduates – they might also have an easier time finding that coveted first job. According to NACE's Job Outlook 2005 survey, eight of the top 10 degrees in demand are quantitatively based – accounting, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, economics/finance, computer science, computer engineering, and information sciences and systems.

Why they're in demand

Alan Weiss, president of Summit Consulting Group, a firm specializing in management development, says a primary reason math and science graduates earn more out of college is a simple case of supply and demand: "They're much more immediately applicable in a much smaller supply."

Students earning associate's and bachelor's degrees in liberal arts disciplines far outnumber students studying in mathematic or scientific fields, according to data from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics.

Of the 10 largest bachelor's degree programs in 2001-02, the most recent year available, only two math- or science heavy majors – biology and accounting – made the list.

Weiss also attributes the demand for quantitative majors to the specialized training they receive. "You can immediately put somebody to work in a lab," he says. "It's much more problematic (determining) what to do with people who majored in

European history."

Math and science majors' familiarity with numbers can help them transition into many bottom-line driven businesses, according to David Teten, CEO of Nitron Advisers, a New York-based independent research firm. "Numbers are the language of business," he says.

The downside

Experts say astonishing quantitative skills alone aren't likely to catapult you to top income brackets later on in your career. "If you want to get rich at a company, you don't go into the financial department," Weiss says. "You go into the sales department."

He says top salespeople's high degrees of assertiveness and persuasiveness, as well as their strong contribution to the company's bottom line, are traits that can launch them to higher salaries than earned by even the highest executives – like the CFO.

Lisa Earle McLeod, columnist and author of *Forget Perfect* (Penguin/Putnam), agrees that good communication skills are key to long-term career success. "Being the best scientist or engineer might make you the head of the department," she says, "but you have to be a good communicator to be put in charge of large groups of people."

People interested in building better communications skills can enroll in writing, speech or liberal arts courses at their local community college or university. Some employers also offer seminars or other opportunities for their workers to improve their writing and speaking techniques.

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