

Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author on the Importance of a Liberal Arts Degree

By Madeline Gallagher

HARRISONBURG - George Anders, the author of “You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Education,” came to JMU on Sept. 18 to speak about his book and share advice with students.

Considering the surge of social anxiety among Generation Z, following the pandemic, Anders urged students to remember that “the person sitting across from you was 19 years old at some point in their life too.”

He finds this to be an effective way to “take that intimidation factor out of the equation.”

“Think of [the interviewer] as a peer who just happens to be a little farther down the road of life than [you],” Anders said. “Not every interview has to be an absolute total win ... All you need is for one of them to work out.”

From his experience of working with LinkedIn recruiters as the organization’s senior editor-at-large, he also suggests being “in touch with the mood of today” — being able to communicate effectively, understanding technology on a basic level and keeping up with trends, media and current events, since these are highly sought-out characteristics to employers.

When he talked about where to go once you have a degree, Anders suggested going for areas that are “not yet built out.”

Anders also warned students against going into areas that have existed longer and haven’t seen much change because that means very little room for growth for newcomers.

The environment and renewable energy were examples of industries that Anders cited as “only getting bigger and bigger,” and he suggested these fields for students who are looking for up-and-coming career paths.

“Get to the growth areas, and opportunities open faster,” Anders said. “You don’t have to be the best out of a thousand people, you just have to be the first.”

Shannon Wilson, who works in the JMU College of Arts and Letters, attended Anders’ event and built upon some of his points.

Wilson read Anders' book shortly after starting her position at JMU as director of professional development and engagement. She noted the book as something that heavily influenced how she decided to approach her position, and she was the one who reached out to Anders and asked him to speak at JMU.

From Wilson's perspective, the most important takeaways from Anders' book are his takes on students having the ability to think about the unknown, gather information from a wide variety of sources and fact-check that information. When describing the benefits of a liberal arts degree she touched on the versatility it offers.

"You can go into any sector you want, you're not tied into that, and your skills will transfer from place to place," Wilson said.

She reminded students to, "be open to jobs that just sound entertaining to you."

"If you're doing something that you're passionate about and that you enjoy, you're going to be very good at it, and you're going to do well," Wilson said. "And then you will be noticed by others."

Naomi Minwalla, a political science major who attended Anders' event, found his book and speech to be very "eye-opening" because it brought crucial issues to her attention.

In Anders' speech, it was mentioned that other colleges and universities, namely [The University of West Virginia](#), are cutting liberal arts programs out of their curriculum.

"After his talk, I definitely felt more educated and aware of what was going on," Minwalla said.

She was intrigued by other ideas Anders brought to light, such as the soft skills he mentions in his book.

Minwalla noted "communication, problem-solving and leadership" as soft skills, or durable skills as Anders calls them, and she explained concerns about the younger generation, Generation Alpha, developing those skills.

She said, "Especially post-COVID, the younger generation has been given so much more access to technology like kindergarteners are being given computers and iPads to take home."

Minwalla found Anders' definition of durable skills to be especially important for higher education, jobs, careers and post-graduation for students.