

THE UNDERGRADUATE

Working It Out

by AMELIA E. LESTER '05

THE SENIOR-YEAR JOB HUNT began as many do: with the purchasing of a suit at the end of the summer. Mine was a black, pinstripe ensemble that my mother assured me was trendy enough for a cutting-edge media job, yet sufficiently conservative to pass muster at even the starchiest of law firms. As I stood suited-out in the store, gaping at the vision of not-quite convincing adulthood in the full-length mirror before me, a typically astute soundbite from E. M. Forster, the subject of my senior thesis, popped into my head. "Mistrust all enterprises that require new clothes," he had warned (echoing Thoreau) in his very first novel, written shortly after graduating from Cambridge. As I stumbled clumsily over the too-long hems of the pants, tucked the dangling price tags under the collar, and fiddled with the bulky shoulder-pads, I couldn't help taking his adage to heart. The suit—all somber colors and rigid outlines—seemed to symbolize a process I wanted no part in. It marked the passage from the cloistered confines of college to the Real World, a place where there would be no more handholding, no more sleeping in past 11, and—if I were really unlucky and landed a job with no benefits—no more health insurance. The suit was my passport from dorm rooms to boardrooms, from dining halls to conference calls. I didn't want to go.

By the start of the school year, my trepidation had turned into a full-blown quar-

ter-life crisis. Part of the problem was that I had no idea what I wanted to do. Family and friends offered soothing platitudes. "Nowadays people change careers seven times" was a favorite. This only made me more worried: I couldn't find *one* job that interested me, let alone seven. "Your job doesn't define you" was another, repeated first in consoling tones and then in an increasingly exasperated manner over the course of the fall semester as I found myself increasingly unable to talk about anything else. I received an e-mail from the English department announcing a careers

seminar, addressed to all senior concentrators, with the subject line "Can I be an astronaut with my English degree?" It was meant in jest, but nonetheless hit a nerve. The answer was, obviously, no, or at least not in the immediate future: four years of musing about authorial anxiety and unreliable narrators seemed to have equipped me for, well, not much, really. The e-mail recalled a joke I had heard a few years before: "What did the liberal-arts graduate say to the business major?" The cruel punch-line: "Do you want fries with that?" It had haunted me ever since.

Graduate school was out of the question. The process of writing (or more accurately, not writing) my thesis had rendered the library a source of fear and loathing. "I've realized that I just don't have a love of learning," confessed a friend who was experiencing similar difficulties in making progress. (She had become so frustrated that she had taken to referring to her thesis as if discussing a particularly obnoxious ex-boyfriend.) Although I didn't feel quite the same way—Forster and I shared

a special sartorial bond, after all—

the thesis process had not left

me overly enamored of the

prospect of spending a fur-

ther six, maybe seven,

years in a state of book-

bound hermitage. I

had also heard desperate

stories of impoverished

graduate students: there was a

rumor circulating that many ate

nothing but ramen noodles

for weeks on end.

Though not especially

money-hungry, I wasn't

sure I could stomach the

scholarly lifestyle.

And so I had the hems

of the pants taken up. It

was a loaded gesture toward

myself that I was about to begin

the job-search in earnest.

First stop was the on-campus

recruiting program, in which about half

the senior class participates every year. It was

attractive for a number of reasons. With-

out having to walk to the Mount Auburn



Street post office (a full seven minutes away!), I could submit résumés on-line to employers who were specifically interested in hiring Harvard students.

I was particularly excited about entering recruiting because I had seen my roommate wooed from all corners by big businesses. There had been trips to New York to stay in expensive hotels for final-round interviews (she brought back the free fluffy hotel slippers for me to pad about in as I procrastinated, endlessly, over Forster's Italian novels), cocktail parties at the Charles Hotel, endless lavish lunches. She actually returned home one day, after dining out at Harvest courtesy of a large consulting firm, complaining that she was sick of eating oysters.

The problem for me was that most of the companies who came to campus to recruit were of the banking and consulting variety. The old English-major-as-astronaut problem returned, but this time it was Wall Street, not outer space, that was out of bounds. I was utterly unqualified for any job requiring quantitative skills. This became clear when my roommate, all oyster-ed out and set to join a major investment bank come the summer, coached me on potential interview questions. We didn't get beyond her first standard-scenario question, which she had been asked countless times and in numerous variations during the course of some 30 interviews: How many Ping-Pong balls can fit inside a 747 aircraft? I went blank. There was nothing about Ping-Pong balls in *The Canterbury Tales*. It was time to look elsewhere.

My only real interview was for an entry-level position at an advertising agency. I wrote what was, in retrospect, a ridiculous cover letter, riddled with clichés about “thinking outside the box,” “enthusiasm to burn,” and something about wanting to work in “a powerhouse of creativity.” The word “dynamic” appeared with alarming frequency. The interviewer asked me what my favorite ad from the past year had been, and in that split second before answering I suddenly realized I didn't even enjoy watching ads, let alone making them. Perhaps it showed: the interview ended abruptly 20 minutes before the designated time. I was given a pen emblazoned with the agency's name before being ushered out the door.

The suit went back in the closet, the pen died shortly afterward, and I began to despair. I overheard conversations between classmates about “securing 12-month contracts” and debates about the best places to look for apartment-rental listings in Washington, D.C. Another roommate received her acceptance letter to a master's program at Oxford.

What there was of a job search was put on hold while I frantically finished my thesis. Returning to the issue, I realized I hadn't actually tried very hard to secure any sort of employment, and when I had gone after a job, it hadn't been with any particular passion or direction. A wonderful careers adviser I met with at the Office of Career Services said I had been “treading water,” expending energy on pursuing jobs I didn't want (advertising, anyone?) because it seemed all too hard to identify and then go after what I really wanted to do. As a result, the prospect of actually finding a job had become more and more remote, to the point where I didn't understand how anyone gained employment at all.


When I asked undecided friends, I discovered many of them felt the same way. We were all scared of failure, and as a result had talked ourselves out of countless opportunities. Those of us who were not yet set up wanted to reject the nameless, faceless employers before they had a chance to reject us. The typical Harvard student may have a résumé more padded than a sumo wrestler, but that doesn't make it any easier to counter the inevitable deluge of disappointments and rejections that come with entry into the job market. In fact, it may make the scramble for employment all the more difficult, because we have all become so adept at dodging any form of negative feedback.

Frustrated by a barrage of impersonal “We regret to inform you” form letters, some friends of mine are taking the road less traveled through creating their own opportunity: an Internet start-up. They hope to build an on-line hub for young progressives, featuring political commentary, cultural coverage, and even a social-networking feature. I admire their refusal



The senior marshals, looking ahead to Commencement 2005, are: (clockwise from top left) first marshal Caleb Franklin, of Leverett House and Los Angeles; Sheria Smith, of Winthrop House and Gary, Indiana; Duncan Graham Wells, of Leverett House and Chevy Chase, Maryland; Silvia Scandar, of Kirkland House and Miami; Mahmoud Youssef, of Cabot House and Staten Island, New York; Dominique Nong, of Dunster House and Redlands, California; and Michael Kalin, of Leverett House and Sioux City, Iowa. Missing from the photograph is Lacey Whitmire, of Currier House and Watkinsville, Georgia.

to succumb to the stability of the corporate world. But at the same time, I think that's probably not for me right now, because I want the chance to prove myself in a structured and established environment before I attempt to break the mold.

I wish there were a more defined end to this story, but it's very much a Senior Spring work-in-progress. I'm still scared of rejection. But I've resolved to send out more cliché-free cover letters, for positions I believe myself well-qualified for, to organizations I am genuinely excited about. To put it another way: I bought new clothes, and now I want the chance to wear them. 

Berta Greenwald Ledecy Undergraduate Fellow Amelia E. Lester '05, an English and American literature and language concentrator in Adams House, hopes a publishing job in New York City is forthcoming.