The Great Recession has dramatically changed the way we value a college education. First came the argument that a college degree isn’t worth the cost. Now we’re bashing the venerable business degree.

The backdrop, of course, is historic disappointment with post-graduate opportunities. The unemployment rate for new college grads is the highest in years and an estimated 26% of those aged 25 to 34 can’t find work. That doesn’t square with nearly $1 trillion outstanding in student loans. You can understand how some would question the value of a college degree.

Meanwhile, pay on Wall Street—where a lot of top business majors hope to land—is going down. Compensation this year will be the lowest since the financial crisis, and the partners at bellwether firm Goldman Sachs are bracing for bonuses that are half or less than what they got last year.

Worse for business majors, new research suggests that the major is overcrowded with underachieving students and that businesses themselves value the discipline less. College expert and blogger Lynn O’Shaughnessy writes:

“Not pursuing an undergrad business degree can actually boost the chances of getting into MBA programs. At some schools, less than 25% of students have an undergrad business degree.”

She goes on to note that the blockbuster book, Academically Adrift, posits that business students learn the least in college and that a new report from the National Survey of Student Engagement concludes business majors study less than other college students.

One in five students pursues a business degree, which is probably more than the world needs. As O’Shaughnessy writes:

“What employers really want, according to workplace surveys, are college grads who can think effectively, communicate and write. Students can obtain these skills from any major, but plenty of research has concluded that students who earn degrees in the liberal arts enjoy a better chance of meeting these job requirements.”

I don’t buy the argument that college is a waste of money. A body of research shows that grads earn a lot more money than non-grads over the course of their life. That doesn’t mean student loans aren’t a huge problem for those with degrees and no job. It’s a good idea to attend college on the cheap—state schools, community college credits—if you are pursuing a low

http://moneyland.time.com/2012/01/10/why-a-business-major-is-no-longer-the-ticket/
paying or crowded field. But for most grads the payoff should be there.

(MORE: Will Tensions With Iran Really Push Gasoline to $5 a Gallon?)

A business degree is another thing. This line of study probably has become too popular. Colleges are minting money-focused graduates in a work world that increasingly values critical thinking and softer skills like the ability to communicate. Today’s workplaces often offer more opportunities for those centered on intrinsic rewards like doing what makes them happy and making a difference. The long maligned liberal arts degree may be more practical than you think.

And make sure to fit some serious math courses in between all those English and history seminars: The 20 best-paying college degrees in 2011 all required advanced math skills, according to compensation firm PayScale.