



Jacob Koch-Gallup  
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## How “Useless” Is That \$75,000-A-Year Liberal Arts Degree?

As a liberal arts college student, the number one question I receive after revealing my philosophy major is “what are you going to do with *that*?” Although my answer to this question is “anything,” many people respond jokingly “nothing.” College students like me across the country are majoring in humanities fields despite false beliefs that practical majors promise a golden path to a successful career. Other college students choose majors in fields that they think will provide a high salary or a safe job prospect. The notion of college majors defining careers hurts students because many times they do not pursue their true passions. Professor R. Eric Landrum explains that “the [humanities] bachelor’s degree qualifies a person for a large number of jobs, but the degree does not uniquely qualify a person for any particular job.” The reality is that college majors, especially in the humanities, do not define students’ careers. Instead, humanities majors prepare students with the critical thinking and communication skills that most employers value. The misconception that majors define students’ careers and the failure to correct it harms students, humanities programs, and the future workforce.

The current decline in humanities majors is due to the misunderstanding that majors determine careers. Jeffrey Selingo, editor of *The Atlantic*, reports that humanities majors which “traditionally made up one-third of all degrees” at liberal arts colleges have now “fallen to well

under a quarter.” Not just liberal-arts colleges show this decline: at “elite research universities the share of humanities degrees has dropped from 17 percent a decade ago to just 11 percent today” (Selingo). Due to the Great Recession many students who grew up witnessing financial insecurity have shifted to more practical, “safe” majors. A survey of new college freshmen “found in the past decade that the No. 1 reason students say they go to college is to get a better job; for the 20 years before the recession hit in 2008, the top reason was to learn about things that interested them” (Selingo). Students miss out by not majoring in their areas of passion because they believe that practical majors provide them with security. With the decline of students in humanities majors, the programs themselves have become underfunded and in danger of extinction.

The existence of humanities programs of both private and public U.S. colleges are at risk, which could affect the critical thinking and communication skills of future generations. The most recent study of humanities funding shows that “even at their 2012 high, expenditures on humanities R&D were dwarfed by those on research in the sciences and engineering. For example, expenditures on medical research were 60 times larger than funding for research in the humanities” (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Funding). In addition, since many humanities programs in private universities are funded by tuition and not government grants, the decreasing number of students majoring in these programs leads to an underfunding of the humanities. Once the humanities programs become underfunded, they have difficulty attracting students, and the vicious cycle continues. With regard to state schools, their interest is in receiving the most money from politicians. So, for the state school to get well-funded, they have

to pitch practical degrees and majors such as business and engineering due to the fact that many politicians do not understand the worth of liberal arts degrees.

A common misconception, causing a decline in humanities, is that students in liberal arts programs have more trouble finding employment than those in practical majors. In reality, humanities majors are just as employed as their pre-professional counterparts. Data from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences shows that the unemployment rate for bachelor's degree holders in the humanities is slightly above 4%, while the unemployment rate for bachelor's degrees holders in all fields is slightly below 4% (12). This difference is insignificant and proves that majors do not affect employment in any meaningful way. Another important point regarding employment is that companies place minimal importance on a student's major. A 2015 Association of American Colleges & Universities survey of 400 employers found that "employers nearly universally agree that to achieve success . . . candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than his or her undergraduate major" (Hart 6). Humanities majors develop critical thinking and communication skills, which employers use to measure success. Students with humanities degrees create philosophical arguments and analyze poetry, which do not seem to translate to the workplace; but, the skills learned from these exercises are valuable and transferable to the workplace. For example, Dr. Carol Lynn Folt, the president of the University of Southern California received her Bachelor's Degree in Aquatic Biology, Master's in Biology, and Doctorate in Ecology. The field of biology does not seem to correlate to the administrative and leadership position of president of a prestigious university, but the skills she learned through liberal arts classes and experience make her a well-qualified president.

Not only are liberal arts majors such as President Folt employed, but also they report high job satisfaction dispelling the myth that humanities majors experience low job satisfaction.

Liberal arts majors are just as satisfied and happy as those with “practical” majors. The American Academy of Arts & Sciences examined job satisfaction using the following categories: Opportunities for Advancement, Salary Benefits, Job Security, and Job Location. The report shows that “on every measure, the share of humanities majors reporting satisfaction was within five percentage points” (13). Evidence indicates that one’s major does not matter with respect to the happiness one has in their job.

Many people believe that humanities degrees are worthless because they do not lead to well-paying jobs after college. However, humanities majors earn higher salaries than professional majors later in their careers. Although pre-professional majors, such as engineering and business, tend to earn greater salaries immediately after college, the social and communication skills that humanities majors possess allow them to make up the salary difference as their careers progress. George Anders, a business journalist, writes, “people with balanced strengths in social and math skills earn about 10% more than their counterparts who are strong in only one area. In fact, socially inept math whizzes fare no better than go-getters who struggle with numbers” (*Forbes*). Humanities majors are not just positioned better with their people skills, but they are also situated to have more dollar to dollar contributions later on in their career. Allie Grasgreen in *Inside Higher Ed* reports this closing of the wage gap, stating that “by their mid-50s, liberal arts majors with an advanced or undergraduate degree are on average making more money those who studied in professional and pre-professional fields, and are employed at similar rates.” If a student is interested in going to graduate school with a priority of

making money, the liberal arts route shows great promise. Students can learn about a subject in the liberal arts that they might be more interested in than other subjects in pre-professional fields and do not have to worry about low earnings.

The failure to address misconceptions about the humanities in the American higher education system greatly harms students and the future of the United States workforce. With fewer students enrolling in humanities majors, future employees may lack critical social and thinking skills. For example, Selingo quotes Debra Satz, the dean of Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences, "what I care about is that every student in engineering can think critically, can read carefully, and they can listen empathetically. That happens by taking courses in the humanities." Humanities courses provide extremely important people and life skills that are needed for social interactions. The problem with students choosing STEM majors over the humanities is that the skills that STEM majors learn may not be necessary in the future with new technology, robots, and AI. Selingo states, "some studies suggest that many of the tasks done by humans in stem fields will be automated in the future; robots may well end up writing most programming and intelligent algorithms." Humanities majors teach students how to connect with people outside of technology, which is highly valuable and timeless. These people skills are now more important than ever due to the increased automation of technology. For example, "the job market is quietly creating thousands of openings a week for people who can bring a humanist's grace to our rapidly evolving high-tech future" (Anders 4). There needs to be a widespread shift of students enrolling back into the humanities if businesses in the future want to continue to thrive.

To fix this crisis, colleges must start pitching their humanities programs better to students and showing the statistics that one's major is not a key factor in their future employment. Some colleges have actually implemented this post-Great Recession, but it needs to become a more common practice. Selingo writes, "to avoid further slippage in humanities majors, elite colleges and universities have resorted to an all-out campaign to convince students that such degrees aren't just tickets to jobs as bartenders and Starbucks baristas." With better promotion from colleges and universities, students may decide to at least give liberal arts majors a try. Even though the repairing of this humanities crisis has started on the college level, the existence of this as a crisis is mainly acknowledged in the higher education sphere. The problematizing and solution stages must become widespread beyond just colleges.

A long-term solution to this problem of declining humanities majors is to reinstate career values from the 1960s. In the 1960s, it was commonly accepted that a college B.A. qualified a student to do any job. This needs to be re-taught by high schools and colleges and then spread throughout the country as a common idea that everyone understands. If this becomes accepted, humanities and liberal arts majors would become de-stigmatized, and students would learn that the major they choose has no detrimental impact on their future careers. With the de-stigmatization of the humanities, the future workforce will be more prepared, well-rounded, and successful. The social skills taught in the humanities will not only ensure a competent future workforce, but also improve social interactions in communities. As a result, humanity as a whole will benefit from the skills learned from the majors in the humanities.

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