

Humanities and the pursuit of happiness

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Letters from Academia

One question that is commonly asked of people who pursue a career in the humanities (like philosophy, literature, history and the like) is, "But what are you going to do for a living?" Even former President Barack Obama once ridiculed those following an art history career. These concerns are even more amplified in the case of first generation college students whose parents oftentimes expect them to follow more conventional careers, such as medicine, law or engineering.

Also, in the last few years there has been great hype about the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines as the only majors worth pursuing because their applicability to the modern world. That push has come from politicians – particularly on the right – who advance the idea that STEM graduates are the only ones who could obtain professional careers. In fact, many liberal arts colleges are adding pre-professional programs to their offerings. Other institutions are going in the other direction. The University of Wisconsin Stevens Point is eliminating many programs, mostly in the liberal arts. But are either of these approaches necessary or the correct response?

A few days ago, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences produced a report that contradicts many of the assumptions that have guided recent changes in academia. The report, titled "The State of the Humanities 2018: Graduates in the Workforce & Beyond," shows humanities grads to have good jobs and are even in positions of authority. It also shows that only a slightly smaller share of humanities graduates think they have enough money, compared to their better-paid non-humanities educated counterparts. Further, the report shows that when it comes to career satisfaction, humanities

graduates are as satisfied as those who majored in STEM-related areas.

The report was generated using data from the U.S. Census, other government sources, as well as from a Gallup poll of workers from around the country.

The Academy's report does show that humanities graduates do earn less, on average, than those in many other fields. The median salary for those with a terminal bachelor's degree in the humanities was \$52,000 in 2015, less than the median for all graduates (\$60,000) and much less than those in engineering (\$82,000). Yet, that earnings gap is reduced over time.

The idea that a humanities graduate is more likely to be unemployed is also disputed by this report. Only 4.3 percent of those with terminal bachelor's degrees were unemployed in 2015, and the figure was under 3 percent for those with a bachelor's in a humanities field and an advanced degree in any field.

Humanities graduates also seem pleased with their career choices. Almost 87 percent of all workers with a bachelor's degree in the humanities reported they were satisfied with their jobs in 2015, which is about the same for graduates from almost every other field. After all, money is not everything.

Further, the report shows that a large percentage of humanities majors are in supervisory roles, with 60 percent reporting that managing or supervising others is part of their job. This percentage is similar to those graduating in other fields.

When it comes to more qualitative

data, humanities graduates are also generating a positive outcome. According to the Gallup survey, many humanities students follow those subjects as an end in themselves and because they have an innate interest in gaining skills toward understanding how the world works.

Among those who do pursue a career for which a humanities degree is part of their jobs, 80 percent said that they are "deeply interested" in their jobs. That number is higher than those pursuing careers in business. Additionally, they do not seem to be particularly concerned about whether they are well compensated or not.

Not only that, but to the statement, "At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day," humanities graduates respond far more affirmatively than do engineering graduates.

All this information is important because it helps to counter the stereotype that humanities graduates are very likely to fail in obtaining a decent job and/or to feel miserable about the investment in time and effort they made earlier in their lives.

It is also useful in showing that the skills and values you learn as a humanities student will be useful to succeed in life. This is another important point because in addition to the stereotypes mentioned above, there has been some discussion that such skills and values are very difficult to define and impossible to measure.

In a recent article published in *American Affairs*, a conservative political magazine (and reprinted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*), Justin Strover, a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, argues that, "there is no case for the humanities" and that "deep down we know our justifications for it are hollow." That is in line with other

conservative-leaning publications, such as *Forbes*, that recommend people selecting a major in college to stay away from a humanities degree.

As the American Academy of Arts & Sciences report shows, such opinions are not based on data. This misunderstanding is what happens when you allow ideology to overshadow facts. But, of course, it is not all the fault of conservatives. Liberals and higher education leaders in general also have a responsibility in not legitimizing misinformation. They not only seem unable to articulate opinions, but also incapable of conveying arguments based on real data, such as the ones summarized in this article.

Unless we take new approaches in higher education communications that go beyond unscientific rankings, athletics, and campus amenities, misinformation on the value of the humanities in particular and on higher education in general will persist. The problem is that we are not just talking about stereotypes. What we are talking about is the declining support for higher education and the increasing perception that a college degree is not worth the time, effort, and money invested in obtaining.

How about a simple and easy tagline to remember, such as "Following a humanities career will most likely fulfill your dream in the pursuit of happiness"?

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