

The Arts and Humanities Degree: Value and Benefits

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In this paper, I address the misconception that an Arts and Humanities degree is not applicable to the modern workforce. I will discuss how the degree sets up a graduate for a very large number of jobs that carry good wages and benefits. The Arts and Humanities student acquires skills in critical thinking, creative and innovative problem-solving, proficiency in oral and written communication, multi- and intercultural sensitivity, ethical training, and the ability to work collaboratively. Companies prefer employees with that skill set rather than those with specialized knowledge. The earnings gap between STEM graduates and Arts and Humanities graduates decreases over time, until by the age of 40, it disappears. Arts and Humanities graduates also move into lucrative careers in business, law, and politics and become entrepreneurs.

For years now, the degree in Arts and Humanities has been the subject of jokes and aspersion. In the United States, politicians, both Republican¹ and Democrat², make fun of the humanities while championing trade schools and majors in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).³ In the United Kingdom, STEM programs are emphasized, with extra government funding allocated to them at the expense of arts and humanities programs, which are deemed ‘less essential’;⁴ this has led, in turn, to universities cutting humanities courses due to lack of monetary support and students.⁵ The government of China has outlined a strategy to turn 42 universities into top-ranked institutions dedicated to science and technology.⁶

Such politicians and government planners are shortsighted; they should be consulting employers about the people whom they prefer to hire.⁷ If they did, they would discover that company CEOs and Human Resource hiring firms give a consistent message: the skill sets that one gains from studying Arts and Humanities are more important than a specialized area of study.⁸ Employers (up to 93 percent in some surveys) are frank in their insistence that they seek in graduates and

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1. *Inside Higher Ed* 2024.

2. Nazworth 2015.

3. Cf. Perry 2020.

4. Banerjee et al. 2024.

5. Burton 2021.

6. Grove 2017.

7. See the essays in Bilbro 2023.

8. See the excellent materials listed on the website of the National Association of Colleges and Employers 2024 (link in the Works Cited).

potential employees a particular set of skills: communication skills, critical thinking skills, the ability to work in teams, and intercultural skills. This is exactly what an education in Arts and Humanities can provide.⁹ For example, LinkedIn has published its research on the skills that employers most value:¹⁰ creativity, persuasion, collaboration, and people management (a skill made possible with the stress in the Arts and Humanities on empathy and cultural sensitivity).¹¹ David Deming has demonstrated in a working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research that companies' "rewards to performing routine tasks have fallen, while the returns to workers' ability to cooperate and adapt to changing circumstances have risen".¹² Adaptability, collaborative work, and creative problem-solving are now more key than specialized training. A recent headline, "Microsoft's President Says Liberal Arts Majors Are Necessary for the Future of Tech",¹³ encapsulates the growing view that Arts and Humanities students are a critical force in the workforce, even in Silicon Valley.¹⁴ Brad Smith, the president of Microsoft asserts: "Languages, art, history, economics, ethics, philosophy, psychology and human development courses can teach critical, philosophical and ethics-based skills that will be instrumental" to the future of technology.

George Anders's 2017 book, *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a "Useless" Liberal Arts Degree*, demonstrates how an Arts and Humanities education can open the door to thousands of cutting-edge jobs. In Chapter 2, Anders analyzed more than 5,000 job advertisements that listed a salary of more than \$100,000. Many of these advertisements called specifically for critical thinking and five key skills:

- A willingness to explore new areas
- Excellent analytic skills, especially in murky areas
- First-rate problem-solving; the ability to find the right answer when it's not obvious
- High emotional intelligence; being able to "read the room"
- Persuasive communication skills, with speaking/listening probably rated even higher than writing

The National Association of Colleges and Employers¹⁵ highlights the importance for graduates being able to demonstrate written communication, critical thinking,

9. Flaherty 2021.

10. Petrone 2018.

11. See also Lobosco 2017, a very useful survey.

12. Deming 2017.

13. Feloni 2018.

14. See Stross's 2017 book on Liberal Arts; Stross describes how Arts and Humanities graduates succeed and flourish in Silicon Valley.

15. National Association of Colleges and Employers 2024.

problem-solving, and collaboration/teamwork, as well as verbal communication, ethics, empathy, and leadership.¹⁶

A unique feature of good oral and written communication skills, critical thinking skills, the ability to work in teams, and empathy (intercultural) skills is that they are *transferable*, that is, they allow a person to move from one job to the next, or to react to changes in their existing job. These days, things change very quickly, and so one needs a strong skill set to adapt. If one focuses only on a single specific job preparation, that job may not even exist in the future (see below). Today's college graduates will change jobs an average of four times before age 30, and so to succeed, they need to be flexible with skills that they can take from one employment to the next with little difficulty. The skills that a degree in Arts and Humanities gives are those very skills.¹⁷ They are the kinds of skills that never grow obsolete. Although the world is constantly changing, especially concerning technology, the abilities, attributes, and skills gained in studying Arts and Humanities remain relevant.¹⁸ What are some of these transferable skills?¹⁹

Employers want people who are comfortable with subjectivity and ambiguity. Often there are multiple solutions or approaches to solving a problem. Many jobs require nuanced thinking, a way of seeking solutions that are not simply black and white but dig beneath the surface.

Also desirable are skills in problem-solving and the ability to approach a problem from multiple perspectives. Employers value workers who of course have mastered a solid content base, but who have also a general breadth of knowledge and put that knowledge to work in solving problems.

Highly sought are excellent verbal communication abilities. Employees must be able to clearly articulate their ideas and to communicate effectively with co-workers, supervisors, and most importantly clients and customers.

Active listening, or the ability to fully hear and understand another's ideas and opinions, is necessary for effective communication. An employee must be able to consider the feelings and thoughts of others, especially when opinions differ²⁰.

16. See the discussion in Ruggeri 2019.

17. See Bouchrika 2024.

18. On a personal note, during my doctoral studies, I was faced with the need to visit European libraries to study the manuscripts relevant to my thesis; now, the manuscripts are digitalized and easily available on the Internet. I had no personal computer, but rather used an IBM Selectric typewriter with removable balls for different languages. Things have changed much since 1980 in terms of technology, but my thesis ultimately depended not on technology, but on critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem-solving, and good writing.

19. See Castrillon 2023. The subject of transferable skills has been widely discussed, and any Internet search will yield dozens of excellent articles.

20. I refer the reader to the thought-provoking essay by Newman 2024, who argues that students studying humanities and Liberal Arts can educate each other (and us) "about the perils of simplistic slogans and narrow-minded thinking, and to reinforce the values of

Ethical thinking and integrity are central to any organization. Businesses require ethical behavior and personal integrity from their employees in the workplace. Students in Arts and Humanities, through their studies and courses, understand the principles of ethics and morality. Related to this, an Arts and Humanities education prepares students to negotiate an increasingly diverse environment and gives them the intercultural understanding to thrive in a global economy and to work comfortably with an ever-increasing diverse workforce.

Collaboration is a highly desirable skill for any employee. This includes the ability to work with others; to respect, listen to, and acknowledge the feelings, opinions, and ideas of others; to complete assigned group tasks in a timely way; and to support group decisions even when not all members are in total agreement.

Employers seek creativity and innovation, the ability to approach a problem in a novel way. Arts and Humanities students are accustomed to think 'outside the box' and to seek solutions.

Finally, because the world is rapidly changing, employers are interested in hiring workers who are committed to continuous learning. Arts and Humanities graduates often pursue postgraduate degrees (see below); their college education instills a commitment to lifelong learning that prepares them to meet the unknown demands of the future and to anticipate, respond to, and manage change²¹.

The Arts and Humanities degree prepares the graduate for employment by providing these invaluable skills,²² and because these skills are transferable, the degree prepares one, not necessarily for a single specialized job, but for hundreds of careers. Opportunities are limited only by one's imagination, interests, and willingness to devote time and energy.²³ Where do Arts and Humanities graduates work? The American Academy of Arts & Sciences determined that in 2021, 61 percent of graduates had found jobs in management, professional, and related occupations. More than 17 percent worked as managers. The business sector is the most common destination (21 percent), but 13 percent enter the legal profession and 13 percent go into the creative sector and communication.²⁴ Stephanie Blochinger, who studied the careers of 1,700 people from 30 countries, concluded with this startling statistic:

critical inquiry and respectful disagreement". Newman even ventures that students in Arts and Humanities can heal the current ideological rift in America.

21. Overall see Detweiler 2021, who offers empirical evidence (interviews with more than 1,000 college graduates aged 25 to 65) for the value of a liberal arts education and its lasting impact on success, leadership, altruism, learning, and fulfillment.

22. And as Olejarz (2018) points out, Arts and Humanities majors are very happy with their education and with the jobs that they receive.

23. See the research by Glassdoor 2019. I would note that most students change their majors two or three times (for reasons see Jaradat 2017). Arts and Humanities students find the transition to a new major easy as much of their coursework can be applied to the new degree plan.

24. *Humanities Indicators* 2022.

The research found that more than half of the leaders studied (55 percent) had either a social sciences (44 percent) or humanities bachelor's degree (11 percent). Those in government jobs were more likely to have studied social sciences, while those in non-profits favoured the humanities. Younger leaders (aged under 45) were more likely to have a social science or humanities background, while those over 45 were more likely to have studied science, technology, engineering or maths (STEM).²⁵

In Table 1 at the Appendix, I list examples of CEOs and renowned entrepreneurs who have succeeded without a degree in business; rather, their training was in humanities, Liberal Arts, and arts generally.²⁶

Now, an oft-repeated statement is that an Arts and Humanities graduate will not find a job unless it is low-paying and 'dead-end'. But the data from the American Community Survey, which is run by the U.S. Census Bureau, show an unemployment rate of about 4 percent for Arts and Humanities graduates.²⁷ That is nearly identical to the unemployment rate for holders of an engineering or business degree (3 percent). Of course, the jobs held by Arts and Humanities graduates are many times not in the major; that is, few anthropologists continue to work in the field as anthropologists; instead, they use their skill sets and become advocacy managers, public relations managers, advertising executives, market researchers, social workers, political consultants, and equality and diversity officers because of their expertise in and understanding of human behaviors and cultures.²⁸

The benefit of an Arts and Humanities degree is not just its applicability to a very wide range of jobs, but also a good salary and compensation. Obviously, people in highly specialized areas like medicine will see the greatest return on their education, but the Strada Education Foundation has issued an important study of the long-term outcomes of a degree in Arts and Humanities (Weise et al. 2023). In this report, the key findings were as follows:

- While Liberal Arts graduates do not earn as much as STEM or healthcare majors, they fare well in the job market: the average graduate earns

25. Blochinger 2015.

26. When I served as associate dean for undergraduate education (2013–2021) at Texas A&M University's College of Liberal Arts, I was struck by businesses like Goldman Sachs interviewing, not accounting majors, but English and history majors. They were looking for mid-level managers who analyze data and communicate to stakeholders, clients, and employees what those data meant, and who handle a diverse set of workers. This is why I always encouraged Liberal Arts students to study data analysis and statistics. The skill sets of an Arts and Humanities degree, coupled with computer skills and mathematical expertise, will lead to lucrative job offers.

27. In 2018, it was 3.6 percent. See *Humanities Indicators 2024*.

28. I took these sample jobs from actual advertisements. See also the various careers for anthropologists in Schanzenbach et al. 2017.

\$20,000 more than the average high school graduate, and the top 25 percent earn \$90,000 or more per year.

- Two out of five Liberal Arts graduates go on to earn graduate degrees, which further boosts their earnings to \$76,000 annually, on average.
- From their first job to their third job, Liberal Arts graduates commonly transition into high-skill, high-demand careers in marketing, advertising, public relations, management, and human resources.
- Seventy percent of Liberal Arts graduates change careers from their first to their second job, compared to 53 percent for IT majors, 54 percent for allied health majors, and 59 percent for education majors.
- Liberal Arts graduates hit their stride later in their careers, experiencing rapid wage growth in their late 30s and early 40s—the fastest among all majors.

The pay gap between a STEM graduate and an Arts and Humanities graduate narrows, in fact, over time. Several reasons account for this. First, Arts and Humanities graduates are committed to lifelong learning. While in college, many students discover that they have much more room in their degree plan than STEM majors, who often have little to no freedom to explore outside their field. Arts and Humanities majors, on the other hand, often easily can incorporate a second major, a minor, or a professional certificate, without adding to the credit hours required for graduation. Those extra areas of study have the potential to enhance job mobility or promotions at a current job. After graduation, postgraduate work is common for Arts and Humanities graduates. Some universities and non-profit institutions cater specifically to offering a master's degree to established workers. For example, the business school at my university purposely constructed a master's in business administration which is targeted to workers who have had no prior coursework in business. Postgraduate degrees or at least adult education courses can help cut the pay gap with STEM workers.

Second, as Jim Chow points out, some STEM jobs can become obsolete, and quickly.²⁹ David Deming found that job advertisements for some fields in engineering now call for skills that did not exist a decade earlier and that the jobs of 10 years ago often required skills that are no longer applicable³⁰. The Arts and Humanities degree instills skills that stand above technology and cultural and social changes: critical thinking, good communication, analytical problem-solving, cultural sensitivity, and collaboration are independent of scientific advancements.

Third, while Arts and Humanities graduates may not fully catch up to STEM graduates in earnings, they still do well in the labor market.³¹ According to the data

29. Chow 2023.

30. Deming 2019; Deming and Noray 2005 and 2019.

31. Again consult Weise et al. 2023.

and analysis by Schanzenbach et al. 2017,³² there is slower growth in earnings for STEM graduates between college graduation and age 40. Both Chow and Deming discuss how, for example, computer science majors and history majors even out eventually in wages. Computer science and engineering majors, by age 40, will reach an average salary of \$124,458. A history major, on the other hand, achieves, by the same age, an average salary of \$131,154, and that average can be even higher as many history majors enjoy excellent lucrative careers by moving into “management, business, and law”.³³

These, then, are some of the strengths and advantages that a degree in Arts and Humanities provides. Contrary to myth, a student pursuing a degree is not facing a fate of cooking hamburgers or teaching high school; rather, they can look forward to good and important jobs because of their skills in critical thinking, creative problem-solving, oral and written communication, multi- and intercultural sensitivity, as well as the vast knowledge of various topics that they possess.

My point is that we need the Arts and Humanities major just as we need the STEM major. Yes, the world may be better off, if there were more engineers, scientists, and technologists; but it would be for the worse without the musician, writer, film director, and historian. An Arts and Humanities education enhances one’s knowledge and improves one’s understanding of the world and its people. It can also help us to engage in the controversies of our time—whether about the environment, cultural diversity, social justice, ethnic strife, gender relations, or foreign policy. Real-world problems rarely ever have textbook solutions. More than anything, the purpose of an Arts and Humanities education is to teach students how to think critically and know what questions to ask, and to mold them into well-rounded, well-informed global citizens.

32. Schanzenbach et al.’s data are in the charts found at <https://www.hamiltonproject.org/data/putting-your-major-to-work-career-paths-after-college/> (accessed on 19 January 2024).

33. The National Center for Education Statistics, a part of the U.S. Department of Education that collects, analyzes and makes available data related to education in the U.S. and other nations, shows that history majors enjoy better employment rates than economics majors.

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Appendix

Table 1. *Sample Executives and Entrepreneurs with Degrees in Arts and Humanities*

Name	Company	Degree	University
Steve Ells	Chipotle founder	Art History	UCLA
Alexa Hirschfeld	Paperless Post co-founder	Classics	Harvard University
Larry Sanger	Wikipedia founder	Philosophy	Reed College
Andrew Mason	Groupon founder	Music	Northwestern University
Peter Hancock	CEO, AIG	Politics and Philosophy	Oxford University
Stewart Butterfield	Flickr co-founder	Philosophy	University of Victoria
Carolyn McCall	CEO, ITV, and former CEO, EasyJet	History	University of Kent
Chad Hurley	YouTube founder	Fine Art	Indiana University
Brian Moynihan	CEO, Bank of America	History	Brown University
Larry Fink	CEO, Blackrock	Political Science	University of California, Los Angeles
Sam Palmisano	Ex-CEO, IBM	History	Johns Hopkins University
Andrea Jung	Ex-CEO, Avon	English literature	Princeton University
A. G. Lafley	CEO, Proctor and Gamble	French and History	Hamilton College
Dam Hesse	CEO, Sprint	International Studies	University of California, Berkeley
Stephen Schwarzman	CEO, Blackstone Group	University Studies in Liberal Arts	Yale University
Judy McGrath	Ex-CEO, MTV	English	Cedar Crest College
Mario Cuomo	Former Governor of New York	English	St. John's University
Robert Gates	Ex-Secretary of the Defense	History	College of William and Mary
Jerry Governor	Former Governor of California	Classics	University of Southern California
Robert Iger	Ex-CEO, Disney	Communications	Ithaca College
Christopher Connor	CEO, Sherwin Williams	Sociology	Indiana University
Herbert Allison, Jr.	Ex-CEO, Fanny Mae	Philosophy	Yale University
Mitt Romney	Former Senator of Utah; ex-CEO, Bain Capital	English	Brigham Young University
Peter Thiel	Founder of PayPal	Philosophy	Stanford University
Carly Fiorina	Ex-CEO, Hewlett-Packard	Medieval History and Philosophy	Stanford University
Ken Chenault	CEO, American Express	History	Harvard University
Carl Icahn	Investor tycoon	Philosophy	Princeton University

Michael Eisner	Ex-CEO, Disney	English and Theatre	Denison University
Hank Paulson	Former Secretary of the Treasury	English	Dartmouth College
Lloyd Blankfein	CEO, Goldman Sachs	Political Science	Harvard University
Sheila Bair	FDIC Chair	Philosophy	University of Kansas
Clarence Thomas	Supreme Court Justice	English	College of the Holy Cross
Harold Varmus	Noble Prize winner in medicine	English	Harvard University
George Soros	Hedge Fund Manager	Philosophy	London School of Economics
Ted Turner	Founder of CNN, TBS, and TBN	Classics	Brown University
Anne Mulcahy	Ex-CEO, Xerox	English	Marymount College
Richard Anderson	CEO, Delta	Political Science	University of Houston
Caterina Fake	Co-founder, Flickr	English	Vassar College

