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Students

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How Liberal-Arts Majors Fare Over the Long Haul

By Beckie Supiano

Skepticism over the value of a college degree, especially one in the liberal arts, is common these days. Rising college prices, increasing levels of student debt, and a still weak job market all heighten doubts. [Return on investment](#) has become a popular research question, and a higher-education association released on Wednesday a report arguing that a liberal-arts major is a worthwhile choice.

In recent years, new data have helped paint a detailed picture of [what college graduates earn](#). Analyses have focused on what they make by major, or by degree program at particular colleges.

On Wednesday the Association of American Colleges and Universities—a champion of liberal education—stepped into the fray with a [report](#), based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, that examines the payoff of a liberal-arts degree over the course of a career.

While the group does not buy into the idea that earnings are the most important college outcome, it had to respond to the “growing myth” that liberal-arts majors leave students “unemployed and unemployable,” said Carol Geary Schneider, its president.

The liberal arts and sciences have traditionally been seen as laying “a foundation for future learning in the professions and in scholarly work,” said Ms. Schneider. The report, she said, shows that to be true.

While humanities and social-science majors started out near the bottom of all college graduates in terms of salary, the report says, older people who majored in those fields—many of whom also

held graduate degrees—outearned their peers who'd picked professional and pre-professional majors.

Right out of college, graduates in humanities and social science made, on average, \$26,271 in 2010 and 2011, a bit more than those in science and mathematics but less than those in engineering and in professional and pre-professional fields, according to the report. But at their peak earning ages, 56 to 60, humanities and social-science majors earned \$66,185, putting them some \$2,000 ahead of professional and pre-professional majors in the same age bracket.

Graduate Degrees Help

Often the focus is on what graduates make right out of the gate, said Debra Humphreys, a co-author of the report and vice president for policy and public engagement at the group, known as AAC&U. But career success, she said, is “more a marathon than a sprint.”

Not surprisingly, people with engineering degrees do particularly well over the course of a career (making \$97,751 at peak earning ages). But, the report points out, they are a small group: only 9 percent of working college graduates. Science and math majors also do quite well over time (making \$86,550 at peak earning ages).

One big reason that older humanities and social-science majors outearn professional majors is that about 40 percent of people in the former group also hold a graduate degree. In fact, the report says, earning a graduate degree on top of a humanities or social-science undergraduate major corresponds with a median annual earnings rise of \$19,550. Excluding the graduate-degree holders, humanities and social-science majors earned less than professional and pre-professional majors.

Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, said he was glad to see the AAC&U tackle the issue of how degrees pay off, a topic he has written a number of reports about. “They're essentially legitimizing the question,” he said.

The report makes a solid argument against those who say

liberal-arts degrees have no value in the marketplace, Mr. Carnevale said. At the same time, it sends a message to liberal-arts majors he would put more bluntly: “Go to graduate school.”

Choosing a Major

The AAC&U designed the report with two audiences in mind: policy makers, and students and their families, said Ms. Humphreys.

It’s important that students start college with a good sense of what they’re likely to earn with different majors—and not just immediately after graduation, she said. One need not choose a major that sounds like a job, Ms. Humphreys said, to have a successful professional life.

As for policy makers, she hopes they’ll recognize that society needs workers in a broad array of fields, not just those that are most lucrative. Humanities and social-science graduates are overrepresented, the report points out, in fields that are important but not well paid, like social work and counseling.

The report, “How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment,” relies on the American Community Survey, which recently began tracking college majors. The data, from 2010 and 2011, cover education and occupation for about three million people.

To give a sense of how workers fare over the course of a career, the report examines annual median earnings in age-group increments of five years, from 21 to 65.

Looking at earnings over a whole career is useful, said Mark S. Schneider, vice president of the American Institutes for Research, who has examined short-term earnings by degree program.

But the report doesn’t give students what they need to make an informed decision about how much debt to take on, said Mr. Schneider. “It’s the program-level data that is actually important.”

No data to calculate the value of a degree are perfect. Median earnings, on which many analyses are based, have their limits, said Sandy Baum, a research professor at George Washington

University's Graduate School of Education and Human Development and author of the College Board's "Education Pays" reports. Medians can't answer the real question, she said: Do most people make a reasonable amount of money?

Research on the extent to which graduates come out ahead—and which ones, by how much—is a complex, charged exercise. With everyone asking about return on investment, even groups that don't think the value of a degree can be quantified are doing the math.

Correction (1/22/2014, 11:24 a.m.): This article originally said that humanities and social-science majors make \$66,185, on average, during their peak earning years, ages 56 to 60, putting them some \$2,000 ahead of professional and pre-professional majors at their peak. It has been corrected to say that humanities and social-science majors earn some \$2,000 ahead of professional and pre-professional majors in the same age bracket.

College Majors and Long-Term Prospects for Pay

Baccalaureate graduates in the humanities and social sciences earn less right out of college than those who majored in professional and pre-professional fields.

By midcareer, they catch up ...

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



PROFESSIONAL AND PRE-PROFESSIONAL



... but much of that wage growth is due to the graduate degrees they received.

	Median wage increase for holders of advanced degrees	% of undergraduate majors earning advanced degrees
Humanities and social sciences	\$19,550	40%
Professional and pre-professional	\$14,214	30%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey