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Over Time, Humanities Grads Close the Pay Gap With Professional Peers

By Scott Carlson

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Bachelor's-degree graduates in engineering and the sciences start out earning roughly \$10,000 to \$30,000 more annually than their liberal-arts peers, a new study finds, but the humanities majors catch up over time.

There is something that the defenders of the humanities (and, more broadly, the liberal arts) want you to know: Sure, graduates who majored in the arts, philosophy, religion, or literature might make less than someone who majored in a professional program — at least initially. But they're loving work and loving life — and that, the advocates have argued, is a good start.

We've seen that conclusion in a number of surveys and reports over the years — from the Gallup-Purdue Index, the Annapolis Group, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, that stalwart defender of liberal education.

Add to that group the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, whose latest report — "The State of the Humanities 2018: Graduates in the Workforce & Beyond" — compares humanities graduates' job status, earnings, and job satisfaction with those of graduates from engineering, business, and the sciences (including health professions).

The results are familiar, if you've read those past reports: Bachelor's-degree graduates in engineering and the sciences earn roughly \$10,000 to \$30,000 more, but humanities majors catch up over time — and humanities majors more effectively close the pay gap between younger and older workers. What's more, the college debt that humanities graduates carry is about the same compared to other majors.

But humanities majors don't seem miffed by the status of their jobs or the size of their paychecks. (And that may reflect, in part, those graduates' expectations for a salary starting out.) For the most part, humanities graduates tracked closely to other fields in job security, job location, and opportunities for advancement. (Education majors, notably, had the highest level of job satisfaction.) The level of satisfaction with their wages is about the same as that of

people in other jobs — although a slightly higher number of humanities respondents, compared with people in business and the sciences, admitted to worrying about money in the past week.

Matthew T. Hora, an assistant professor in liberal arts and applied studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who studies the path from college to the work force, says the report should “contradict the popular narrative about under-employed baristas and the need to redirect students away from these disciplines.”

However, he notes that arts majors seem to come up short in the report. They worry more about money than other majors, they’re less satisfied with their job benefits, and they have higher unemployment rates. The perception of “starving artists” is one that has haunted arts colleges, in particular.

The study pointed out another strength of humanities majors, compared with others: They don’t see their education tied to a specific field. That might be unsettling at the beginning, but it means that humanities majors are open to pursuing a variety of jobs in a lifetime — like management or other high-paying positions. For example, one million people with humanities degrees work in management, and some 600,000 work in business and financial operations. A quarter of the legal profession is made up of humanities majors. Those fields can pay well.

What’s unclear, says Hora, is whether humanities graduates “are highly desired in these occupations and thus are snapped up by employers, or if graduates fall into these careers because other options have dried up.”

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