

What Are You Going to Do with *That* Major?

by Patricia Counihan

This is probably the most frequent question students majoring in a humanities field or thinking about majoring in one hear from their parents, relatives, friends, or anyone they meet if the conversation veers toward their college experience and their future.

The short answer is: “The sky is the limit!” The longer answer will vary according to each student’s combination of interests, skills, experiences and knowledge. Along with that answer comes an important point: according to a recent report issued by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the long-term benefits of a humanities degree are excellent (Humphreys and Kelly 2014). In fact, individuals with B.A. degrees during their peak earning years “annually earn more than professional or pre-professional majors” and for the 40 percent of liberal arts majors who get advanced degrees, they “boost their annual earnings by nearly \$20,000.”¹

The challenge for humanities majors is to understand that they are multitalented and that, unlike specific majors such as engineering or forestry where the major translates to a specific occupational field upon graduation, a bachelor of arts degree can give students the skills and abilities to succeed in careers in a wide variety of work settings. Humanities majors possess the curiosity, the flexibility, and the open-mindedness that allows them to thrive over time.

All colleges and universities have career centers with professional staff committed to providing career counseling for students to help them to identify their talents and interests and develop strategies to make a successful transition from college to career. At the University of Maine, the career center not only provides career counseling and testing, it encourages humanities majors to acquire experience by engaging in volunteer work, service-learning, student activities, part-time jobs, internships, and study abroad. For example, the UMaine History Department offers internships for course credit (for more information, see the department’s website: <http://umaine.edu/history/undergraduate>). These experiences can help students decide about things they enjoy and are passionate about. Also, students are encouraged to seek opportunities to acquire specialized skills such as learning a second (or third!) language, adapting to other

cultures through service opportunities or study abroad, and learning technical skills such as new media design, business and technical writing, language translation, computer languages, statistical analysis, or teaching English as a second language.

Consider this: a vast number of employers who recruit and hire college graduates state that they do not care what the graduate’s major is; what they care about are the knowledges, skills, and abilities that applicants possess. The employers provide the specialized training for the job. The key characteristics they seek are the ability and willingness to learn and enthusiasm for the work.

Humanities majors possess transferable skills in abundance, skills that are highly valued by employers in a variety of settings. Top transferable skills valued by employers include analysis, communication, cultural literacy and foreign language proficiency, emotional intelligence, leadership, managing qualitative information, planning and organizing, research, and systemic thinking.

A survey of employers who regularly attend the UMaine Career Fair each year shows that over 25 percent are interested in interviewing and hiring humanities majors. These employers range from the business sector to the nonprofit sector, to the government sector and the education sector, to the military, both enlisted and civilian jobs.

A 2013 survey of employers conducted by Hart Research Associates (2013) finds that 95 percent of employers give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that enable them to innovate in the workplace, and 93 percent of those surveyed favored a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex problems, over a candidate’s undergraduate major. In addition, 80 percent of employers agreed that, regardless of major, all college students should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences. Employer priorities emerging to the top of the list (regardless of major) are listed in the sidebar on the following page.

What do the following jobs have in common? Outreach advocate, family crisis services; online marketing strategist; paralegal, Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project; staff assistant, U.S. House of Representatives; operations specialist, U.S. Navy; development coordinator, U.S.

EMPLOYER PRIORITIES**Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World**

- Broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences
- Global issues and knowledge about societies and cultures outside the United States
- Knowledge about science and technology

Intellectual and Practical Skills

- Critical thinking and analytic reasoning
- Complex problem solving
- Written and oral communication
- Information literacy
- Innovation and creativity
- Teamwork skills in diverse groups
- Quantitative reasoning

Personal and Social Responsibility

- Problem solving in diverse settings
- Ethical issues/public debates important in their field
- Civic knowledge, skills, and judgment essential for contributing to the community and to our democratic society
- Ethical decision making

Integrative and Applied Learning

- Direct experiences with community problem solving
- Applied knowledge in real-world settings

Diplomacy Center at Foreign Affairs Museum Council; environment management fellowship coordinator. These are all jobs that recent UMaine humanities graduates obtained after graduation.

Hannah Hudson (2012 graduate of UMaine) is working as a research associate at the Cohen Group in Washington, D.C. Hannah has this to say about the value of her humanities degree:

For me, a degree in the humanities has prepared me to think critically, and perhaps more importantly, react critically, to situations that I encounter at work. My experience within both my international affairs coursework and the Honors College has given me a unique awareness of the human component of situations when addressing a problem for a client. Often, my response needs to consider all of the stakeholders and how decisions or suggestion will be interpreted and perceived. My classes in the humanities allowed me to explore the various origins of cultures, philosophies and histories that can influence these complicated issues. Additionally, a more concrete example would be the emphasis put on writing during my coursework. Writing papers, even just descriptive essays, allows you to perfect the way you form a sentence and articulate a thought. Being able to communicate effectively in the work place is crucial. On the simplest level, coworkers notice and appreciate when your emails are crafted professionally.

A common mantra repeated by job seekers is “It’s not what you know, it’s whom you know.” One way that humanities students bridge their academic learning with the real world is by working with their college career centers to connect with alumni. For example, at UMaine, alumni and friends have volunteered to be mentors for students through the Maine Mentor Program. Students using this program can establish contacts, gain career advice, and become connected to individuals who are willing and eager to assist University of Maine students with their career decision making to successfully transition to the work world upon graduation. A review of Maine Mentor profiles reveal that there are humanities graduates working in the fields of travel and tourism, diversity training for nonprofits, university fundraising and development, financial analysis for corporations, environmental law, library administration, international education and many others. As one Maine Mentor commented recently, “UMaine students generally have the skills and abilities to be successful, they just need that confidence boost that they are completely capable of doing the job.”

There is a great resource, “What Can I Do With This Major?” (<http://whatcanidowiththismajor.com/major/>) where students can select their major or their

What to Do with an English Major

- Writing/Editing (creative writing/journalism/freelance)
- Technical Communication (technical writing and editing, science and medical writing, grant and proposal writing, software and hardware documentation, information technology writing, human-computer interface design, corporate communications and training, mechanical communication)
- Publishing (editing, advertising, sales, circulation, production, publicity, marketing, promotion, administration)
- Education (teaching, administration, higher education administration, information/library science, non-classroom teaching, English as a second language, research, tutoring)
- Advertising (creative services, account management, media, account planning, production)
- Public Relations (media relations, social media, account management, fund raising, research)
- Law (prosecution, contractual, corporate, nonprofit or public interest, government, mediation, lobbying)
- Business (management, customer service, sales and marketing, human resources, insurance, claims, underwriting)

intended major and learn about numerous options available to them that draw upon their academic training in the humanities. An example is provided in the sidebar. This resource also suggests specific strategies for becoming marketable for each career option.

Strategies for becoming marketable for business positions, for example, include acquiring a business minor; gaining relevant experience through part-time jobs, internships, or volunteer work; securing leadership roles in campus organizations and student professional associations; seeking experience as a financial officer or treasurer of a campus organization; and developing strong analytical and computer skills.

Lisa Dezso, a UMaine senior with a double major in English and communications, is happy with her double major. “I picked English because it is what I enjoy and love and I added on my communications major to develop practical skills such as interpersonal and public speaking skills.” As a result of her coursework, Lisa says that she is now a much better writer, is more open to different viewpoints, and is better able to think analytically. Lisa has discovered that she needs to pay attention to her passions and interests and find a way to turn them into an employable hobby. In Lisa’s case, she has a passion for music and she is now in the process of applying to graduate school to become an expressive arts therapist.

Graduate and professional school specialization is another excellent option for humanities graduates. According to Humanities Indicators website, a project of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (<http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/>), humanities majors do well on admissions tests for professional schools including the MCAT (Medical School Admission Test) the GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test) and the LSAT (Law School Admission Test). Here at UMaine, on average 20 percent of students go directly on to graduate or professional school upon graduation, and many humanities graduates choose to continue their education by specializing in a career field at the graduate level. Since learning how to learn is one of the transferable soft skills that humanities students acquire, it is no surprise that humanities graduates succeed in graduate and professional school and go on to establish themselves in many professional careers that require a graduate degree.

All in all, a major in the humanities is a wise choice for students who seek to have a solid base for a variety of careers. Combining a humanities degree with experiences and a unique skill set related to their interests and passions allows undergraduates to be competitive when it is time for them to be hired or accepted into graduate or professional school upon graduation, and it gives individuals the foundation for long-term career success. 

ENDNOTE

1. The press release is available at <https://www.aacu.org/press/press-releases/new-report-documents-liberal-arts-disciplines-prepare-graduates-long-term>

REFERENCES

Hart Research Associates. 2013. It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success. Hart Research Associates, Washington, DC. http://aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf

Humphreys, Deborah, and Patrick Kelly. 2014. How Liberal Arts & Sciences Majors Fare in Employment: A Report on Earnings and Long-term Career Paths. Association of American Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC.



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University of Maine Commencement, 2012 (photo courtesy University of Maine)



Student, University of Maine (photo courtesy of University of Maine)