

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## COMMENTARY

# Use Data to Make a Strong Case for the Humanities



Martin Tognola for The Chronicle

By Norman M. Bradburn and Robert B. Townsend | NOVEMBER 27, 2016 ✓ PREMIUM

Leaders in higher education often ask us how they might make a case for the humanities, when students and parents are so deeply concerned about their economic futures. The answers lie in the very numbers that are so often cited as admonitions against the

field.

Yes, humanities majors make less than engineers and graduates from the physical sciences; if a student's aptitudes and interests point to those disciplines, they certainly should be encouraged to focus their energies there. But if their interests lean toward the humanities, the evidence is clear — majoring in the humanities is not a path to poverty. According to Census Bureau data, the median income for humanities students who ended their studies with a bachelor's degree was \$50,000 in 2013, substantially higher than the income of those who did not earn a degree (\$35,000). Contrary to political rhetoric that became popular during last year's political primary campaigns, philosophers do, in fact, make more than welders.

Unemployment rates for humanities graduates are also significantly lower than the national average. The rate for humanities graduates who do not go on to earn an advanced degree was 5.4 percent in 2013, compared with 7.2 percent among those in the work force with only a high-school degree. For humanities majors who go on to earn advanced degrees, the unemployment rate fell to just 3.4 percent. Leaders and faculty in

higher education should feel comfortable making the case that graduates from their humanities programs are not condemned to lives of penury.

What's more, humanities majors are more likely than the average graduate with a bachelor-of-arts degree to get advanced degrees (42.5 percent compared with 36.3 percent of all B.A.s and 38.4 percent for engineers). That graduate study provides a tangible boost in income, amounting to a 42-percent increase in median earnings as of 2013, which reduces the differential between humanities majors with advanced degrees and other majors with advanced degrees.

But income is not all there is to life. The evidence shows that humanities graduates leave college with different vocational values. While it is clear that those whose goal in life is to make a lot of money turn away from the humanities, data from the Department of Education's most recent Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study show that humanities majors tend to be less materialistic than their peers.

The subsequent occupations of many humanities graduates bring those values together with their subsequent earnings. Humanities majors are much more likely to end up in jobs that are essential to society — such as teaching — but which are traditionally undercompensated.

This may explain why, despite the disparities in median incomes between the fields, almost 90 percent of humanities majors reported satisfaction with their jobs after 10 years, and nearly 80 percent were pleased with the opportunity to use their education — comparable with the other fields. Notably, education majors had the highest levels of satisfaction, despite having the lowest level of median income.

It is also important to keep a temporal dimension in mind as well: The gap in incomes between humanities majors and graduates from other fields narrows over time, though it does not fully close. This fits with evidence from a separate (albeit dated) study of employers in the 1980s, who reported that graduates from liberal-arts fields started out at a disadvantage relative to their more narrowly prepared peers, but that over time the flexibility of their thinking and their more accomplished communication skills helped them advance more quickly in business.

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Taken together, there is a good case to be made for the humanities, even in the area that is often cited as the field's greatest weakness.

Alongside the economic case for majoring in the humanities, there is a relatively small but growing body of evidence that indicates taking courses in the humanities can have positive educational and social effects —

regardless of a student's major. There the evidence is quite interesting — ranging from studies of the cognitive benefits of language study (which seem to open up neural pathways to learning) to findings that reading and experience with artistic activities enhance empathy, and even some findings that medical students become better diagnosticians with some study of art history.

So the core questions that seem to be driving students and parents to question the humanities as a potential college major — the long-term economic consequences of the choice — can be answered with reassuring data. And there is additional evidence to buttress the role of the humanities in a general-education curriculum.

But the bottom line for students with an interest and aptitude for humanistic study is that following their hearts will also lead to financially satisfactory lives.

Norman M. Bradburn is a professor emeritus and former provost at the University of Chicago. Robert B. Townsend is director of the Washington office of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. They are principal investigators at the Humanities Indicators.

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