

Meet the parents who won't let their children study literature

Forcing college kids to ignore the liberal arts won't help them in a competitive economy.



By **Steven Pearlstein** September 2 Follow @StevePearlstein

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When I assigned an 800-page biography of Andrew Carnegie for a new undergraduate course on wealth and poverty at George Mason University a few years ago, I wasn't sure the students would actually read it. Not only did most of them make it to the end, however, but many thanked me for giving them the chance to read a popular work of history. Curious, I inquired how many were history majors. Of the 24 honors students in the seminar, there were none. English? Philosophy? Fine arts? Only one. How was this possible? I asked. Almost in unison, half a dozen replied: "Our parents wouldn't let us."

The results were similar when I surveyed freshmen in another honors seminar this spring. This time, I asked how many would have been humanities majors if the only criteria were what they were interested in and what they were good at. Ten of the 24 raised their hands.

I was aware, of course, of the drift toward pre-professionalism on college campuses, of widespread concern over student debt, of stories about college-educated baristas living in basements, of governors threatening to cut off state funding for French literature and anthropology. Even so, I found it shocking that some of the brightest students in Virginia had been misled — by parents, the media, politicians and, alas, each other — into thinking that choosing English or history as a major would doom them to lives as impecunious schoolteachers.

And it's not just at state schools like Mason. Harvard University professor Jill Lepore recalled hosting an information session at her home for undergraduates interested in a program she directs on history and literature. One student who attended, Lepore told the New York Times, kept getting text messages from her parents ordering her to leave the meeting immediately.

"I have heard from many different colleges that there is now a considerable — and disturbing — amount of parental pressure

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against the liberal arts," reports Debra Humphreys, a senior vice president at the Association of American Colleges and

Universities. One reason for the "explosion" of double majors — as high as 40 percent of students at some elite schools — is that students want one major to satisfy Mom and Dad and another to satisfy their own interests, she says.

Parents are becoming more deeply engaged in nearly every aspect of their children's lives, and it's carrying over even to their choice of major. "A lot of our students feel parental pressure to go into business, economics, medicine," says Christy Buchanan, who heads the office of academic advising at North Carolina's Wake Forest University, a traditional liberal arts college that recently announced new programs in biomedical sciences and engineering. Buchanan, a psychology professor who studies the role of families in adolescent development, says this is what "helicopter parenting" has come to.

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Matthew Boyce, George Mason's director of undergraduate admissions, reports that parents are more interested than ever in the direct path between a degree program and a first job, and the eventual salary associated with that degree. "To many of them, that pathway from liberal arts seems a little more muddled," he said. Adds Saskia Clay-Rooks, Mason's acting director of career services: "What parents are thinking about is return on investment."

I certainly got that sense when I buttonholed students and parents at an information session this spring for high school seniors who had been accepted to Mason. "To spend \$80,000 on a history degree, I'd need to see a way forward" to a career, said Kyle Tucker of Fredericksburg, Va., as he stood with his son in the long line in front of the engineering school's booth. (The boy was torn between cybersecurity and accounting.) Bradley Gray of Richmond told me that he enjoys history, but "it's hard to get a job with a history degree — that's what I hear, anyway. The only opportunities are in teaching or working in a museum." Bradley is aiming for something in STEM — science, technology, engineering or math.

"We're on the defensive," acknowledges Robert Matz, a Shakespearean scholar who, as an associate dean in Mason's College of Humanities and Social Sciences, is leading an effort to promote the value of liberal arts degrees. The English department's [website](#), for example, now has a prominent section, "What Can I Do With a Degree in English?," that [lists](#) famous actors, musicians, judges, politicians and corporate executives who were English majors.

Over the past 30 years, the shift in college majors hasn't been as dramatic as many assume. As the total number of students has doubled, the humanities have suffered modest losses in market share, while natural and social sciences have been the big winners. But more recently, in the wake of the Great Recession, the number of degrees in the core humanities disciplines — English, history, philosophy — has fallen sharply. In the mid-1960s, they represented as much as 17 percent of degrees conferred; now that figure is just over 6 percent.

This focus on college as job training reflects not only a misreading of the data on jobs and pay, but also a fundamental misunderstanding of the way labor markets work, the way careers develop and the purpose of higher education.

Let's start with unemployment. A [study](#) by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce found that in 2011 and 2012, when the economy was in the early stages of recovery, the unemployment rate for recently graduated majors in

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humanities and liberal arts (8.4 percent) wasn't all that different from the jobless rates for majors in computers and math (8.3 percent), biology (7.4 percent), business (7 percent) and engineering (6.5 percent). Today, with an improved economy, the numbers for all majors are almost certainly lower.

Underemployment — the barista problem — is also overstated. When researchers at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York looked at that issue, they found that the share of recent college graduates in low-wage jobs rose from 15 percent in 1990 to 20 percent in 2012, the latest year in the report — hardly an epidemic. They also found that over the years, about one-third of recent graduates have always worked jobs that don't require college degrees but pay decent wages nonetheless — and that has been as true for science and business majors as for those with degrees in humanities and social sciences. Even in good times, it's quite typical for recent college grads to take several years to find jobs that make use of their education.

Then there is the matter of pay. The first thing to say is that reports of liberal arts majors living lives of deprivation and disappointment have been greatly exaggerated. It is true that STEM and business majors earn the most, with median annual incomes between \$60,000 and \$80,000. But even the average humanities major, with wages of just over \$50,000, earns enough to fit comfortably in the American middle class. Just as significant are the variations in incomes within majors. The top 25 percent of history and English majors earn more than the average major in science and math, while the bottom 25 percent of business majors make less than the average wages of those majoring in government and public policy.

It would be a mistake, of course, to attribute salary differences solely, or even primarily, to the choice of major. One study by economists at Yale found that half of the premium earned by STEM majors can be explained not by what they learned in college but by the greater intelligence, diligence and other characteristics that they brought to those majors in the first place. Or to put it another way, they would have earned more no matter what they majored in.

And, of course, starting a major is not the same as completing it, given attrition rates of 48 percent among STEM majors (alas, its even higher in humanities). Cal Newport, a professor of computer science at Georgetown and author of the book "How to Win at College," has interviewed hundreds of students about their college experience. Based on those interviews and observation of his own students, Newport believes that those who chose majors simply to please their parents are more likely to give up or burn out. "It's just harder to weather the hard times if you don't have the intrinsic motivation," he said.

You might not expect college freshmen to understand that careers don't proceed in straight lines, but surely their parents ought to. In the real world, most physics majors don't become physicists, most psychology majors don't become psychologists, and most English majors don't become writers or teachers. You'll find a surprising number of philosophy majors at hedge funds and lots of political-science majors at law firms. I was an American studies major. Among chief executives of the largest corporations, there are roughly as many engineers and liberal arts majors, in total, as there are undergraduate majors in business, accounting and economics combined. Indeed, one study found that only 27 percent of people have jobs that are substantially related to their college majors — a reality that applies even to the STEM fields. "Choosing a major is not choosing a career," says Jeff Selingo, author of "There Is Life After College."

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For me, there's nothing more depressing than meeting incoming freshmen at Mason who have declared themselves as accounting majors. They're 18 years old, they haven't had a chance to take a course in Shakespeare or evolutionary biology or the history of economic thought, and already they've decided to devote the rest of their lives to accountancy. It's worth remembering that at American universities, the original rationale for majors was not to train students for careers. Rather, the idea was that after a period of broad intellectual exploration, a major was supposed to give students the experience of mastering one subject, in the process developing skills such as discipline, persistence, and how to research, analyze, communicate clearly and think logically.

As it happens, those are precisely the skills business executives still say they want from college graduates — although, to be fair, that has not always been communicated to their human-resource departments or the computers they use to sort through résumés. A [study](#) for the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that 93 percent of employers agreed that a “demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a job candidate's] undergraduate major.”

In today's fast-changing global economy, the most successful enterprises aren't looking for workers who know a lot about only one thing. They are seeking employees who are nimble, curious and innovative. The work done by lower-level accountants, computer programmers, engineers, lawyers and financial analysts is already being outsourced to India and the Philippines; soon it will be done by computers. The good jobs of the future will go to those who can collaborate widely, think broadly and challenge conventional wisdom — precisely the capacities that a liberal arts education is meant to develop.

“What we are constantly reminding parents is that the world is an incredibly dynamic place and what's most important is for students to develop an entrepreneurial mind-set,” said Andy Chan, vice president of personal and career development at Wake Forest. “They need to think not just about the first job but a lifetime of jobs.”

There are some, such as Georgetown's Anthony Carnevale, who worry that the liberal arts model of “intellectual exploration” has become an unaffordable anachronism, unsuited for a democratized higher-education system in which 18 million students are educated each year at an annual cost of more than \$400 billion. But I tend to side with Johann Neem, a historian at Western Washington University, who finds it “incredibly elitist to say that the masses cannot have the intellectual leisure and curiosity of an elite education.”

So here's what I'd say to parents who, despite all the evidence, still believe that liberal arts majors waste four years contemplating the meaning of life: At least those passionate kids won't make the mistake of confusing the meaning of life with maximizing lifetime income.

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