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Study of philosophy makes gains despite economy

By Jeff Gammage
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Shannon Maloney had already earned a degree in mechanical engineering, but she returned to Lehigh University for a fifth year to complete a second major she knows will make her more employable:

Philosophy.

Yep, philosophy.

Though philosophy is routinely dismissed and disparaged - as useless as English, as dead as Latin, as diminished as library science - more college students are getting degrees in that field than ever before.

Though the overall figures remain small, the number of four-year graduates has grown 46 percent in a decade, surpassing the growth rates of much bigger programs such as psychology and history.

In an era in which chronic unemployment seems to demand hard skills, some students are turning to an ancient study that they say prepares them not for a job, but for the multiple jobs they expect to hold during their lifetimes.

"It's teaching me to see the big picture and to think about things in a different way," said Maloney, 22, of West Chester. "Not only can I do the math and figure out how to design something and build something, but I can see it in the context of a business plan."

To be sure, the giant majors of business, education, and engineering attract exponentially more students than philosophy, whose graduates account for about 1 percent of all bachelor's degrees in the United States. But at a time when some majors have faded to near-extinction, philosophy is showing gains.

Nationally, 12,444 students received degrees in philosophy or religious studies in 2008-09, the latest year for which federal figures are available, up from 8,506 in 1998-99. That 46 percent increase occurred during a period when the total number of four-year college graduates grew at a slower 33 percent.

During that span, the number of students earning social-science and history degrees went up 35 percent, psychology was up 28 percent, and education actually went down, falling 5 percent.

"The demise of philosophy, and, more generally, of the liberal arts, is grossly exaggerated," said Jeff

Robbins, a professor of religion and philosophy at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pa.

The word *philosophy* comes from the Greek *philosophia*, meaning "love of wisdom," and its study is defined as, well, even philosophers can't agree on an exact interpretation. Plato described it as "the science of the idea."

Generally, philosophy seeks to answer the deepest questions of why we are here and what we should do, to connect political, ethical, and social systems within a broad, unified field.

Dartmouth University philosophers advise: If you want to learn about the human body, take biology. If you want to know about the mind, take psychology. If you want to know how the body and mind relate, take philosophy.

Thomas Jefferson had a philosophy degree. So did martial-arts specialist Bruce Lee, Supreme Court Justice David Souter, activist Angela Davis, and NBA coach Phil Jackson.

Proponents say it teaches analytical skills that enable students to succeed in everything from running businesses to practicing law to operating nonprofit agencies.

"In their other courses they're being told what to think," said John Carvalho, chairman of the Villanova University philosophy department. "In philosophy, we tell them, 'You haven't begun to think until you don't know what to think.' "

That is, to recognize that some problems have multiple solutions - or no solution. To think critically, write clearly, and argue cogently.

In seven years as department chairman, Carvalho said, he's seen a small increase in the number of students, to about 75 majors and 25 graduates a year - but a big increase in the quality of those students.

Top performers have grade-point averages in excess of 3.9. These days, if a student arrives with a GPA of less than 3.3, he counsels him or her about whether philosophy is a good choice.

Brian Karalunas, a three-time all-American in lacrosse, graduated from Villanova with a philosophy degree in the spring - and in September was drafted by the Minnesota Swarm of the National Lacrosse League.

He thinks his major has helped his playing. The ability to make logical decisions, to explore several possibilities for the best option, comes directly from philosophy, he said.

"It helps you to think slowly in fast situations," said Karalunas, 22, expected to debut as a pro in January.

He never planned to major in philosophy, but found that early courses "cultivated critical thinking and spurred imagination. Those life skills, I thought, were the most valuable I could get."

There's not much question that philosophy students are smart.

From 2001 to 2004, philosophy majors had the highest average score on the verbal reasoning and analytical writing sections of the GRE, the standardized test for graduate school.

And being a "philosopher," however the work might be defined, is among the best jobs in the country, according to CareerCast.com, an employment website. The company ranked 200 jobs based on income, environment, stress, physical demands, and employment outlook.

The top job was software engineer. The position of philosopher ranked 16th, ahead of astronomer, aerospace engineer, and pharmacist, and well ahead of the worst jobs, which included newspaper reporter and nuclear plant decontamination technician.

In strict terms of salary, however, philosophy majors don't fare so well, according to PayScale Inc., a Seattle firm that tracks compensation. In the company's 2011-12 ranking of top undergraduate degrees, philosophy stood 48th, with a median midcareer salary of \$75,600.

That was far behind a host of engineering, math, and chemistry degrees.

Philosophy has long been derided as a degree for drifters, a major that offers no clear career path. Search "philosophy" and "useless" on Google and you get nearly 10 million hits. Over the summer, USA Today ran a column on academic advising headlined, "A philosophy major . . . who now works full time at Sears."

Suffice it to say, though, that not everybody is selling snowblowers in the lawn and garden department.

Steven Occhiolini is an accountant in the Blue Bell office of LarsonAllen L.L.P., a national accounting firm.

He always wanted to be an accountant, but became captivated by philosophy as a freshman at La Salle University. He graduated in 2008 with a double major.

At LarsonAllen, he's found that philosophy helps him produce more descriptive, better-written reports.

"It really makes your brain work in a different way," Occhiolini said.

Others say the same.

Maloney, the Lehigh student, originally intended to take philosophy as a minor, having enjoyed a couple of early classes. But halfway through her senior year, "it seemed like all arrows were pointing toward a philosophy major being a really good idea. It kind of fills the hole in my education."

She decided that paying for a fifth year of college - and forgoing a year's salary - was worth it. She plans to look for jobs in technical fields in the spring, confident that she'll be better able to understand and explain complicated problems.

"I'll be going in with a set of skills that are uncommon in engineers," she said. "Most engineers struggle to explain simply - they get bogged down in the details. Philosophy teaches you to take a step back, understand what your audience needs to know, and explain it to them so that they don't get lost in the scientific challenges."

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