

APPENDIX A: THE TRUTH ABOUT PHILOSOPHY MAJORS

Here's the inaccurate, old-school way of thinking:

- Philosophy majors have no marketable skills; they are unemployable.
- They are unprepared for professional careers in anything but teaching philosophy.
- They are useless in an economy built on exploding tech, speed-of-light innovation, and market-wrenching globalization.
- They are destined to earn low salaries.

Here's the new reality: All these assumptions are FALSE.

CAREERS

A wide range of data suggest that philosophy majors are not just highly employable; they are thriving in many careers that used to be considered unsuitable for those holding “impractical” philosophy degrees. The unemployment rate for recent BA philosophy graduates is 4.3 percent, lower than the national average and lower than that for majors in biology, chemical engineering, graphic design, mathematics, and economics.¹

Nowadays most philosophy majors don't get PhDs in philosophy; they instead land jobs in many fields outside academia. They work in business consulting firms, guide investors on Wall Street, lead teams of innovators in Silicon Valley, do humanitarian work for nongovernment organizations, go into politics, and cover the world as journalists. They teach, write, design, publish, create. They go to medical school, law school, and graduate school in everything from art and architecture to education, business, and computer science. (Of course, besides majoring in philosophy, students can also minor in it, combining a philosophy BA with other BA programs, or take philosophy courses to round out other majors or minors.)

Many successful companies—especially those in the tech world—don't see a philosophy degree as impractical at all. To be competitive, they want more than just engineers, scientists, and mathematicians. They also want people with broader, big-picture skills—people who can think critically, question assumptions, formulate and defend ideas, develop unique perspectives, devise and evaluate arguments, write effectively, and analyze and simplify complicated problems. And these competencies are abundant in people with a philosophy background.

Plenty of successful business and tech leaders say so. Speaking of her undergraduate studies, Carly Fiorina, philosophy major and eventual chief executive of



Hewlett-Packard, says, “I learned how to separate the wheat from the chaff, essential from just interesting, and I think that’s a particularly critical skill now when there is a ton of interesting but ultimately irrelevant information floating around.”²

Flickr and Slack cofounder Stewart Butterfield, who has both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in philosophy, says, “I think if you have a good background in what it is to be human, an understanding of life, culture and society, it gives you a good perspective on starting a business, instead of an education purely in business. You can always pick up how to read a balance sheet and how to figure out profit and loss, but it’s harder to pick up the other stuff on the fly.”³

Sheila Bair got her philosophy degree from the University of Kansas and went on to become chair of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation from 2006 to 2011. She says that philosophy “helps you break things down to their simplest elements. My philosophy training really helps me with that intellectual rigor of simplifying things and finding out what’s important.”⁴

Philosophy: A Natural Segue to Law and Medicine

Law schools will tell you that a major in philosophy provides excellent preparation for law school and a career in law. Philosophy excels as a pre-law major because it teaches you the very proficiencies that law schools require: developing and evaluating arguments, writing carefully and clearly, applying principles and rules to specific cases, sorting out evidence, and understanding ethical and political norms. Philosophy majors do very well on the LSAT (Law School Admission Test), typically scoring higher than the vast majority of other majors.

Philosophy has also proven itself to be good preparation for medical school. Critical reasoning is as important in medicine as it is in law, but the study and practice of medicine requires something else—expertise in grappling with the vast array of moral questions that now confront doctors, nurses, medical scientists, administrators, and government officials. These are, at their core, philosophy questions.

David Silbersweig, a Harvard Medical School professor, makes a good case for philosophy (and all the liberal arts) as an essential part of a well-rounded medical education. As he says,

If you can get through a one-sentence paragraph of Kant, holding all of its ideas and clauses in juxtaposition in your mind, you can think through most anything. . . . I discovered that a philosophical stance and approach could identify and inform core issues associated with everything from scientific advances to healing and biomedical ethics.⁵

Photo 1: Carly Fiorina, businessperson and political figure

Photo 2: Stewart Butterfield, cofounder of Flickr and Slack

Photo 3: Sheila Bair, nineteenth chair of the FDIC

Philosophy major and NBC journalist Katy Tur says, “I would argue that for the vast majority of people, an education of teaching you to think critically about the world you are in and what you know and what you don’t know is useful for absolutely everything that you could possibly do in the future.”⁶

It’s little wonder, then, that the top ranks of leaders and innovators in business and technology have their share of philosophy majors, a fair number of whom credit their success to their philosophy background. The list is long, and it includes:⁷

Patrick Byrne, entrepreneur, e-commerce pioneer, founder and CEO of Overstock.com

Damon Horowitz, entrepreneur, in-house philosopher at Google

Carl Icahn, businessman, investor, philanthropist. . . .

Larry Sanger, Internet project developer, cofounder of Wikipedia

George Soros, investor, business magnate, philanthropist

Peter Thiel, entrepreneur, venture capitalist, cofounder of PayPal

Jeff Weiner, CEO of LinkedIn

Of course, there are also many with a philosophy background who are famous for their achievements outside the business world. This list is even longer and includes:

Wes Anderson, filmmaker, screenwriter (*The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*)

Stephen Breyer, Supreme Court justice

Mary Higgins Clark, novelist (*All By Myself*, *Alone*)

Ethan Coen, filmmaker, director

Stephen Colbert, comedian, TV host

Angela Davis, social activist

Lana Del Rey, singer, songwriter

Dessa, rapper, singer, poet

Ken Follett, author (*Eye of the Needle*, *Pillars of the Earth*)

Harrison Ford, actor

Ricky Gervais, comedian, creator of *The Office*

Philip Glass, composer

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, author (*Plato at the Googleplex*)

Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*

Chris Hayes, MSNBC host

Kazuo Ishiguro, Nobel Prize–winning author (*The Remains of the Day*)

Phil Jackson, NBA coach

Thomas Jefferson, U.S. president

Charles R. Johnson, novelist (*Middle Passage*)

Rashida Jones, actor

Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights leader

John Lewis, civil rights activist, congressman

Terrence Malick, filmmaker, director (*The Thin Red Line*)

Yann Martel, author (*Life of Pi*)



Photo 4: Katy Tur, author and broadcast journalist for NBC News

Photo 5: Damon Horowitz, entrepreneur and in-house philosopher at Google

Photo 6: Larry Sanger, Internet project developer, cofounder of Wikipedia

Photo 7: Stephen Breyer, Supreme Court justice

Photo 8: Stephen Colbert, comedian, TV host

Photo 9: Angela Davis, social activist

Photo 10: Lana Del Rey, singer and songwriter



Photo 11: Chris Hayes, MSNBC host

Photo 12: Rashida Jones, actor

Photo 13: Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights leader

Photo 14: John Lewis, civil rights activist, congressman

Photo 15: Terrence Malick, filmmaker, director

Photo 16: Yann Martel, author (*Life of Pi*)

Deepa Mehta, director, screenwriter (*Fire, Water*)

Iris Murdoch, author (*Under the Net*)

Robert Parris Moses, educator, civil rights leader

Stone Phillips, broadcaster

Susan Sarandon, actor

Susan Sontag, author, (*Against Interpretation*) MacArthur Fellow

David Souter, Supreme Court justice

Alex Trebek, host of *Jeopardy!*

George F. Will, journalist, author (*Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball*)

Juan Williams, journalist

Philosophy Majors and the GRE

Philosophy majors score higher than *all other majors* on the Verbal Reasoning and Analytical Writing sections of the GRE (Graduate Record Examinations).

	Verbal Reasoning	Quantitative Reasoning	Analytic Writing
Philosophy	160	154	4.3
Average	149.97	152.57	3.48

Educational Testing Service, 2017 GRE Scores, between July 1, 2013 and June 30, 2016.

SALARIES

According to recent surveys by PayScale, a major source of college salary information, philosophy majors can expect to earn a median starting salary of \$44,800 and a median mid-career salary of \$85,100. As you might expect, most of the higher salaries go to STEM graduates (those with degrees in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics). But in a surprising number of cases, salaries for philosophy majors are comparable to those of STEM graduates. For example, while the philosophy graduate earns \$85,100 at mid-career, the mid-career salary for biotechnology is \$82,500; for civil engineering, \$83,700; for chemistry, \$88,000; for industrial technology, \$86,600; and for applied computer science, \$88,800. Median end-of-career salaries for philosophy majors (10–19 years' experience) is \$92,665—not the highest pay among college graduates, but far higher than many philosophy-is-useless critics would expect.⁸

Another factor to consider is the increase in salaries over time. On this score, philosophy majors rank in the top ten of all majors with the highest salary increase from start to mid-career at 101 percent. The major with the highest increase: government, at 118 percent. Molecular biology is the fifth highest at 105 percent.⁹

Salary Potential for Bachelor's Degrees

Major	Median Early Pay	Median Mid-Career Pay
	(0–5 yrs. work experience)	(10+ yrs. work experience)
Mechanical Engineering	\$58,000	\$90,000
Applied Computer Science	\$53,100	\$88,800
Information Technology	\$52,300	\$86,300
Civil Engineering	\$51,300	\$83,700
Business and Finance	\$48,800	\$91,100
Biotechnology	\$46,100	\$82,500
Business Marketing	\$45,700	\$78,700
Philosophy	\$44,800	\$85,100
History	\$42,200	\$75,700
Advertising	\$41,800	\$84,200
General Science	\$41,600	\$75,200
Telecommunications	\$41,500	\$83,700
English Literature	\$41,400	\$76,300
Marine Biology	\$37,200	\$76,000

PayScale, "Highest Paying Bachelor Degrees by Salary Potential," 2017–2018 *College Salary Report*, <https://www.payscale.com/college-salary-report/majors-that-pay-you-back/bachelors>.

And among liberal arts majors, philosophy salaries are near the top of the list. All liberal arts majors except economics earn lower starting and mid-career pay than philosophy does.

Salary Potential for Liberal Arts Bachelor Degrees

Major	Median Early Pay	Median Mid-Career Pay
	(0–5 yrs. work experience)	(10+ yrs. work experience)
Economics	\$54,100	\$103,200
Philosophy	\$44,800	\$85,100
Political Science	\$44,600	\$82,000
Modern Languages	\$43,900	\$77,400

Photo 17: Deepa Mehta, director, screenwriter (*Fire*)

Photo 18: Susan Sontag, author, MacArthur Fellow

	(0–5 yrs. work experience)	(10+ yrs. work experience)
Geography	\$43,600	\$72,700
History	\$42,200	\$75,700
English Literature	\$41,400	\$76,300
Anthropology	\$40,500	\$63,200
Creative Writing	\$40,200	\$68,500
Theatre	\$39,700	\$63,500
Psychology	\$38,700	\$65,300
Fine Art	\$38,200	\$62,200

PayScale, “Highest Paying Bachelor Degrees by Salary Potential,” *2017–2018 College Salary Report*,
<https://www.payscale.com/college-salary-report/majors-that-pay-you-back/bachelors>.

MEANING

In all this talk about careers, salaries, and superior test scores, we should not forget that for many students, the most important reason for majoring in philosophy is the meaning it can add to their lives. They know that philosophy, after two-and-one-half millennia, is still alive and relevant and influential. It is not only for studying but also for living—for guiding our lives toward what’s true and real and valuable. They would insist that philosophy, even with its ancient lineage and seemingly remote concerns, applies to your life and your times and your world. The world is full of students and teachers who can attest to these claims. Perhaps you will eventually decide to join them.

RESOURCES

- American Philosophical Association, “Who Studies Philosophy?” <http://www.apaonline.org/?whostudiesphilosophy>.
- BestColleges.com, “Best Careers for Philosophy Majors,” 2017, <http://www.bestcolleges.com/careers/philosophy-majors/>.
- The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Department of Philosophy, “Why Major in Philosophy?” <http://philosophy.unc.edu/undergraduate/the-major/why-major-in-philosophy/>.
- University of California, San Diego, Department of Philosophy, “What Can I Do with a Philosophy Degree?” <https://philosophy.ucsd.edu/undergraduate/careers.html>.
- University of Maryland, Department of Philosophy, “Careers for Philosophy Majors,” <http://www.philosophy.umd.edu/undergraduate/careers>.
- George Anders, “That ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech’s Hottest Ticket,” *Forbes*, July 29, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/georgeanders/2015/07/29/liberal-arts-degree-tech/#5fb6d740745d>.
- Laura Tucker, “What Can I Do with a Philosophy Degree?”, TopUniversities.com, March 2, 2015, <https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/careers-advice/what-can-you-do-philosophy-degree>