Regular readers of our column know that we are unabashed fans and supporters of the humanities and the creative and performing arts. We believe that the world’s thorniest problems will not be solved—nor will our nation be secure—without an understanding of ethics, cultures other than our own, and what it means to be fully human. And we have seen first-hand that students who complete liberal arts degrees have deeply satisfying—and productive—personal and professional lives.

Such reassurances, however, may not be enough to satisfy high school seniors, undergraduates, and their parents. We hope the economic value of a degree isn’t the only reason young people come to college, but we recognize that it’s a big reason, and increasingly so in the wake of the global recession and intensifying global competition. Given the cost of a college education, moreover, we understand why so many parents and students want to know which majors are most likely to result in jobs with high incomes.

We’d love to point to data indicating that majors don’t matter in employment, starting salaries and lifelong earnings. But facts are stubborn things. Last January the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University published *Hard Times: College Majors, Unemployment and Earnings*, and in mid-October the U.S. Census Bureau released a pair of briefings based on data from the American Community Survey, and the two studies reached the same conclusions. Individuals with engineering degrees, they indicate, experience lower unemployment and make more money than graduates with any other major. Undergraduate majors in computer science, mathematics, statistics, business, life sciences, and physical sciences are next in line. Liberal arts majors are at the back of this pack.

**In Pictures: 10 Worst College Majors**

There is a lot more, however, to this story. Liberal arts majors actually do just fine, with incomes far in excess of the median in the United States. And many of them, like the Cornell graduates surveyed in 2009 (download here), are as satisfied or more satisfied with their lives as their classmates in other disciplines. For them, to quote an English proverb, enough is as good as a feast.

The liberal arts, moreover, also serves as a preferred pathway to rewarding and remunerative careers. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), medical schools accepted 43 percent of the biological sciences majors, 47 percent of physical sciences majors, 51 percent of
humanities majors, and 45 percent of social sciences majors who applied in 2010. “Admission committee members know that medical students can develop the essential skills of acquiring, synthesizing, applying and communicating information through a wide variety of academic disciplines,” the AAMC states.

**In Pictures: 15 Most Valuable College Majors**

The American Bar Association agrees: “The ABA does not recommend any undergraduate majors or group of courses to prepare for a legal education. Students are admitted to law school from almost every academic discipline.” A study by a Chicago State University professor bears this out: the top ten majors with the highest acceptance rates for law school include philosophy, anthropology, history and English. Both organizations advise prospective applicants to choose majors that interest and challenge them, work hard for excellent grades, develop their research and writing skills and make the most of the opportunities that come their way.

These statistics remind us how important it is for students to major in what they enjoy most and what they’re best at. When they do so, they’re more likely to excel in their classes and enhance their career options. Those who complete post-baccalaureate study will enhance their chances of eating their cake and having it too, with prestigious, high-paying jobs and, equally important, from our point of view, fulfilling work that allows them to make a difference in the world.

And so, when students and parents ask, “What can I do with a liberal arts major?” the right answer, grounded in the evidence, is “A lot. A whole lot.”

**You might also like...**

[The 10 Worst College Majors](http://www.forbes.com/sites/collegeprose/2012/10/29/does-your-major-matter/)