

Liberal Arts Grads Win Long-Term

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<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/22/see-how-liberal-arts-grads-really-fare-report-examines-long-term-data>

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By

[Allie Grasgreen](#)

Liberal arts majors may start off slower than others when it comes to the postgraduate career path, but they close much of the salary and unemployment gap over time, a new report shows.

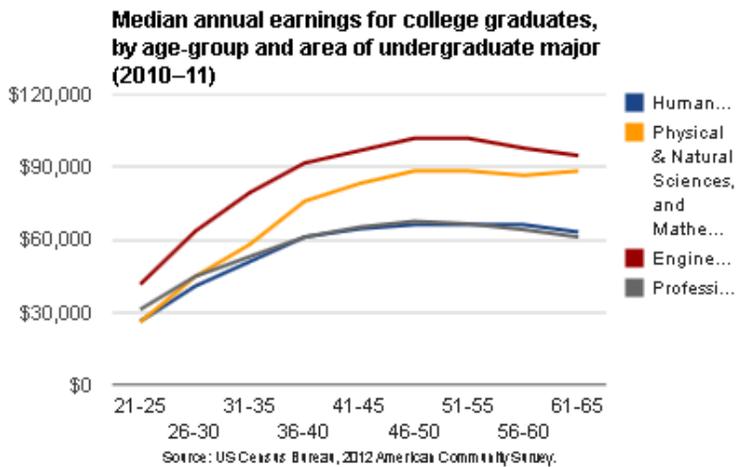
By their mid-50s, liberal arts majors with an advanced or undergraduate degree are on average making more money than those who studied in professional and pre-professional fields, and are employed at similar rates. But that's just one part of the paper's overall argument that concerns about the value of a liberal arts degree "are unfounded and should be put to rest."

"That's a myth out there – that somehow if you major in humanities, you're doomed to be unemployed for the rest of your life. This suggests otherwise," said Debra Humphreys, a co-author of the report and vice president for policy and public engagement at the Association of American Colleges and Universities. "That sort of journey to professional success is more of a marathon than a sprint."

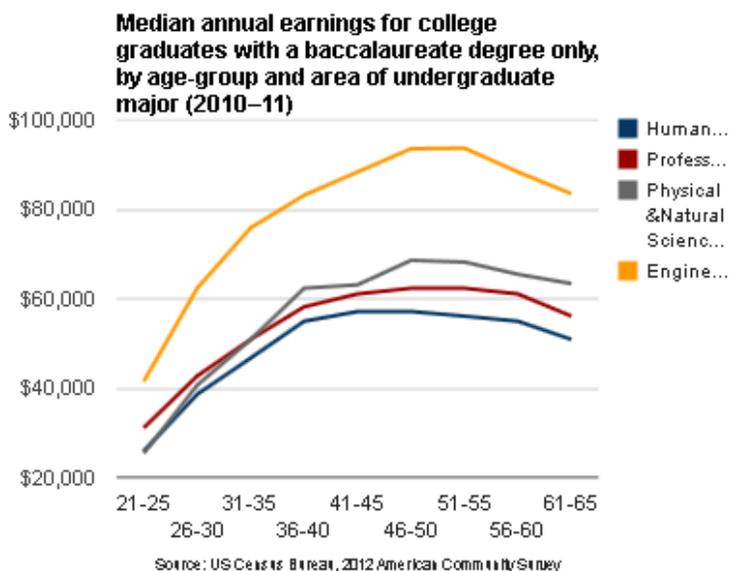
The report, "[How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment](#)," includes U.S. Census data from 2010 and 2011 and is a joint project of AAC&U and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Humphreys and her co-author, Patrick Kelly, a senior associate at NCHEMS, looked at long-term career path and salary data as an answer to the many [short-term studies](#) on recent graduates that have fueled the assertion that liberal arts graduates are disproportionately un- or underemployed.

"For me, the real story here is they did the report – that is, the AAC&U decided to step up to the question of economic value. The liberal arts community in general would rather not talk about it," said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. "It's a mistake, because there is economic value in liberal arts and humanities degrees at the four-year level."

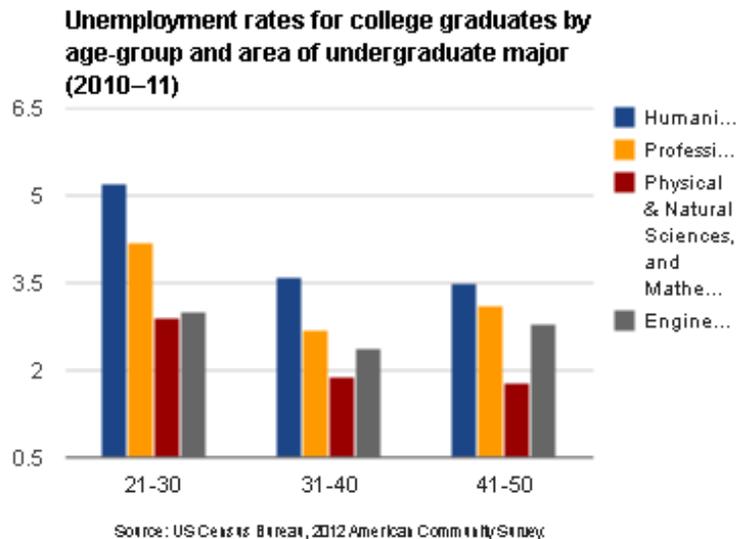
At peak earning ages (56-60), graduates with a baccalaureate degree in a humanities or social science field are making \$40,000 more than they were as recent graduates (21-25). And while in the years following graduation they earn \$5,000 less than people with professional or pre-professional degrees, liberal arts majors earn \$2,000 more at peak earning ages, when they make about \$66,000. (Salaries in both fields still lag behind engineering and math and sciences graduates, who in their late 50s make about \$98,000 and \$87,000, respectively.)



Liberal arts graduates don't fare quite as well when they possess just an undergraduate degree, though. The workers with advanced degrees in any field of study – who make up about 40 percent of all liberal arts graduates, and earn about \$20,000 a year more for it -- push the earnings averages up significantly. Among graduates with a baccalaureate degree only, those with humanities and social sciences degrees consistently earn less than anyone else, peaking at about \$58,000 a year.

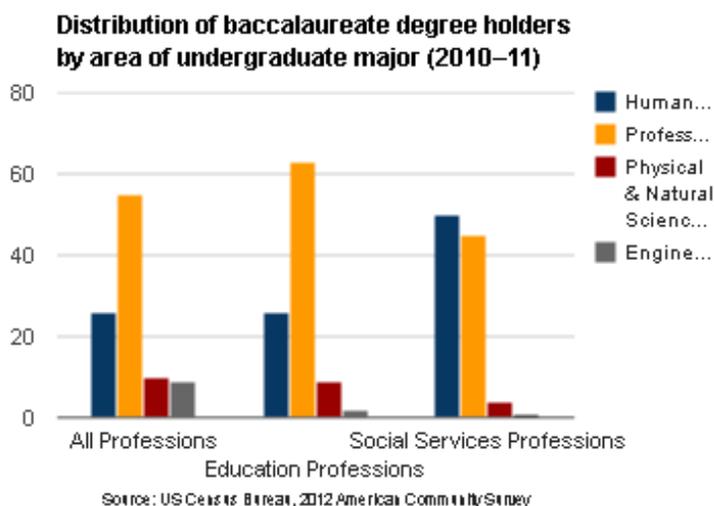


And while 5.2 percent of liberal arts degree-holders are unemployed from the ages of 21-30, that rate drops to 3.5 percent among 41- to 50-year-olds. Though they come close, liberal arts graduates never quite close the unemployment gap between themselves and professional or pre-professional graduates, whose rate drops from 4.2 to 3.1 percent among the same age groups.



Part of the salary difference may be explained by another finding that the report authors highlight: liberal arts graduates are far more likely to wind up on lower-paying -- if no less important -- career paths. Liberal arts degree-holders fill half of all social services jobs (including counselors, social and human/community service workers, religious workers and "similar categories"), compared to 26 percent in both the education and "all" professions.

It's unclear whether liberal arts graduates are pursuing social service jobs because they're more drawn to them, because they're suited to a wider breadth of possible fields (which also contributes to a slow start salary-wise) or because that's simply what's left after all the other jobs are taken.



Regardless, Humphreys said, all of the report's data taken together should add some much-needed context to the debate surrounding the value of a liberal arts degree, particularly as [states](#) and [college leaders](#) are prioritizing which areas of study to fund or shutter and President

Obama [wants to rate](#) colleges based on graduates' job placement and earning power, most likely at short-term intervals.

"We do need more engineers, but we also need more social workers," Humphreys said, adding that when choosing a major, a broad education and a decent-paying job are "not an either/or proposition."

Although students typically choose a major based on their interests rather than earning potential, the report's findings reinforce that they are in fact making the right call, Carnevale said. However, he added, "I think the advice to almost any liberal arts graduate is to get a graduate degree."

While making the case that liberal arts graduates are perfectly payable and employable, the report also drives home the fact that there's one area where humanities and social sciences majors have everyone beat: meeting employers' desires and expectations.

Employers consistently say they want to hire people who have a broad knowledge base and can work together to solve problems, debate, communicate and think critically, the report notes – all skills that liberal arts programs aggressively, and perhaps uniquely, strive to teach.

"Until somebody proves otherwise, they own the argument about general skill," Carnevale said.

"The choice of undergraduate college major is not all that matters in determining long-term career success," the authors write in the report's conclusion. "While there are differences in outcomes related to employment, the majority of college graduates do achieve success in their careers, regardless of their choice of undergraduate major."