

In Defense of the "Useless" College Major

Every family gathering seems to have that one relative who hears "philosophy degree" and physically winces. I know, because I was the philosophy major fielding the winces. The assumption underneath them is that a major only counts if it maps neatly onto a job title and a starting salary. That assumption is not just narrow; it's wrong. The so-called useless major, the one in literature, history, or classics, delivers a real and measurable payoff, and dismissing it as impractical misreads both the data and the purpose of an education.

The economic case is stronger than the stereotype suggests. Humanities majors do start with lower salaries, which is true and worth admitting, but the gap narrows considerably over a career. A study from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York found that by mid-career, majors like history and philosophy earn salaries comparable to several applied fields, partly because the skills they build, such as writing, reasoning, and argument, age well. Employers keep saying they want critical thinkers and clear communicators, and those abilities don't come with an expiration date the way a specific software tool might. The "useless" degree quietly turns out to be durable.

There's also a value here that a salary figure can't capture, and pretending otherwise cheapens the whole conversation. A college education is one of the few structured chances a person gets to wrestle with hard questions about meaning, justice, and history before the demands of full-time work swallow the free hours. When I read Kant at nineteen, it didn't teach me a marketable skill, but it taught me how to sit with a difficult idea without flinching, and I've used that far more than anything vocational. Education shapes how you think and what you notice, and reducing it to job training discards its deepest function.

None of this means everyone should study Latin or that practical majors are somehow lesser. The point is narrower and, I think, more reasonable. We've built a story where worth equals earnings, and that story quietly convinces bright, curious students to abandon the subjects that light them up. That's a loss, both for them and for a culture that still needs historians, writers, and people trained to ask why. The next time someone winces at a "useless" major, the honest response is that it was never useless. We were simply measuring it with the wrong ruler.