

## Go Ahead, Major in the Liberal Arts

**L**ate last year the National Endowment for the Humanities issued a report recommending that the study of the humanities once again take its place at the heart of the college curriculum. Objections rose quickly from the doubters who long ago learned that the liberal arts, including the humanities, never put a scrap of gold or silver in anyone's pocket. Reading old stories and learning dead languages won't prepare people for jobs in the real world. Right?

Well, happily, the Career Center of the University of Texas has just performed a major public service for the nation, particularly for our college students and the future of their economic well-being. In the October 10 issue of *Career News*, the center has demonstrated that the liberal arts do not in fact lead irrevocably to one of three choices: teaching, graduate school or the soup line.

The Career Center's survey of more than 1,300 recent University of Texas liberal arts graduates reveals that 80 percent are employed full-time, 12 percent are full-time students and 5 percent are voluntarily unemployed, while only 3 percent are unemployed and looking for work.

Those are encouraging numbers by any standard. Twenty-eight percent of those surveyed completed graduate degrees and now have careers in business, law, medicine, education and many other professional areas.

For those liberal arts majors who earned no graduate degree, 47 percent currently have jobs in the business world that require a college education. Another 24 percent have comparable jobs in nonbusiness settings, such as human services, journalism and politics. And, surprise of surprises, only 8 percent hold teaching jobs.

I can hear the doubters asking: You mean our students can be students of the humanities and still find gainful employment? Seems that way. In fact, the U.T. Career Center survey concludes that liberal arts graduates have access to more sectors of the labor market than specialized graduates. They are entering a broad range of careers without training beyond the

bachelor's degree, including banking, retailing, insurance, real estate, computer programming and systems analysis, radio-TV, public relations, advertising and market research.

So much for the myth that liberal arts majors have been magnanimously decreasing the surplus population of eligible candidates for paying careers. But that stubborn old story still lingers among students who watch in dismay as recruiters parade into campus placement offices to interview specialists, such as business majors or engineers.

At such a moment the competitive edge of a BBA seems large. But the U.T. Career Center survey finds that it is an illusory advantage. Businesses are equally interested in liberal arts majors. The difference is that liberal arts majors often must generate first job opportunities on their own initiative without relying greatly on campus recruiters. But later, the Career Center finds, most of them succeed and become happily employed in the business world.

They may even have a distinct advantage in the end. The liberal arts graduate often makes significant leaps of responsibility and advancement. A study of AT&T's management system, for example, showed that 43 percent of the humanities and social science majors achieved at least the fourth level of the corporation's management hierarchy (a measure of considerable success), compared with only 32 percent for business majors and 23 percent for engineers.

Part of all this unsuspected success, says the U.T. Career Center, has to do with the fact that liberal arts graduates are likely to have developed certain skills that are indispensable to all areas of work, skills such as research, writing, speaking and analyzing. They can then easily develop more specialized "salable skills" in on-the-job training, internships or graduate schools.

More significant, however, are the indications that American business leaders in all fields regard liberal arts education as a valuable economic resource. "A liberally educated person

is still the type of individual needed at the highest levels of corporate life," says Robert Callander, president of Chemical Bank. "The technical skills are built upon this base. It is that peculiar mix of the behavioral sciences, natural sciences, mathematics, history and English that produces a mind capable, in later life, of bringing mature judgment to complex — and sometimes great — issues."

The humanities hold a central place in that peculiar mix. For it is still required of every man, even in the late 20th century, that he should walk abroad among his fellow men, no matter what his chosen career. Even in the age of high technology and specialization, mankind is still our business. As the U.T. Career Center points out, every product or service still requires people to sell the product, people to distribute the product, people to work the product, talk with those who use the product and analyze future markets for similar products.

There are many things from which we may derive good by which we do not profit. The welcome message from the U.T. Career Center survey is that study of the humanities is not one of them. Their study does not — I repeat, does not — incapacitate a person for gainful employment. I hope that other schools around the country will follow U.T.'s lead and help get that message out. And I hope that the recognition of the humanities' value and profitability continues to grow among leaders of all fields and occupations.

Most of all, though, I hope that college students will pay attention to findings of this kind. Do not fear the world too much. Take the time to make mankind your business: read literature, study history, know philosophy, learn languages. You will find that the humanities and other liberal arts will help you succeed, and profit, in any career or endeavor.

*William J. Bennett, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, recently was confirmed as U.S. Secretary of Education.*

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