

Shocker: Humanities Grads Gainfully Employed and Happy

New data suggest that STEM majors are not the only route to success.

By [Scott Jaschik](#)

<https://goo.gl/GuRbKb> accessed 2/12/2018

What's the worst college major for your career, according to [Forbes](#)? Anthropology and archaeology. [Kiplinger's](#) says to stay away from religious studies, music, anthropology and art history.

Such warnings are common these days. And liberal arts professors and admissions deans at liberal arts colleges will tell you that plenty of students (and an even larger share of parents) believe them. Many colleges with liberal arts roots are rushing to add preprofessional programs.

But [a study](#) being released today by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences -- based on data from the U.S. Census and other government sources, plus Gallup polling of workers nationwide -- challenges the myth of the underemployed, unhappy humanities graduate.

The report doesn't contest that those who majored in engineering or natural sciences earn more, on average, than do humanities graduates do. But it shows humanities grads to be gainfully employed and holding positions of authority, and finds that only a slightly smaller share of them than of their better-paid counterparts think they have enough money. When it comes to measures of career satisfaction, humanities grads are as satisfied as those who majored in STEM.

Robert B. Townsend, director of the Washington office of the academy, said he hopes these data change the public discussion, which tends to fixate on stereotypical images of unemployed humanities graduates. "I think the top-line numbers about earnings still tend to drive much of the conversation, while the counterexamples are too often anecdotal. Hopefully, these numbers will provide for a better-grounded discussion," he said.

The report starts off with the negative side of things for humanities advocates.

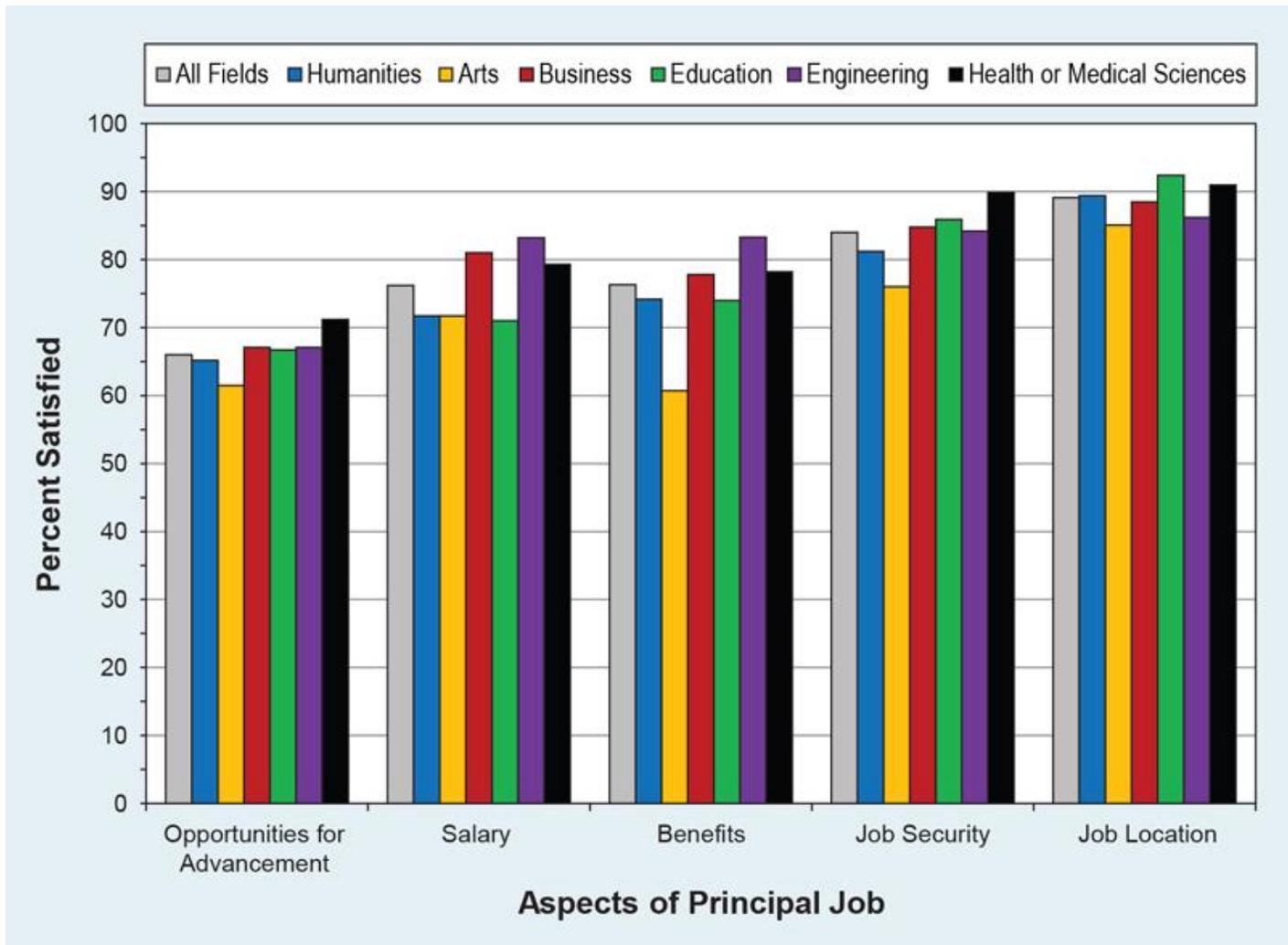
Humanities graduates do earn less, on average, than those in many other fields. But they are in fact employed, and earning. The median salary for those with a terminal bachelor's degree in the humanities was \$52,000 in 2015, less than the median for all graduates (\$60,000) and much less than those in engineering (\$82,000). As previous studies have shown, the report notes that the pay gaps narrow over time.

Turning away from pure financial figures, the report finds that humanities majors are succeeding in the work force by a range of measures. Almost 87 percent of all workers with a bachelor's degree in the humanities reported they were satisfied with their jobs in 2015, comparable to graduates from almost every other field. The figure was 90 percent for those with a bachelor's degree in the humanities and then an advanced degree (in any field).

Humanities majors also are employed. Only 4.3 percent of those with terminal bachelor's degrees were unemployed in 2015, and the figure was under 3 percent for those with a bachelor's in a humanities field and an advanced degree in any field.

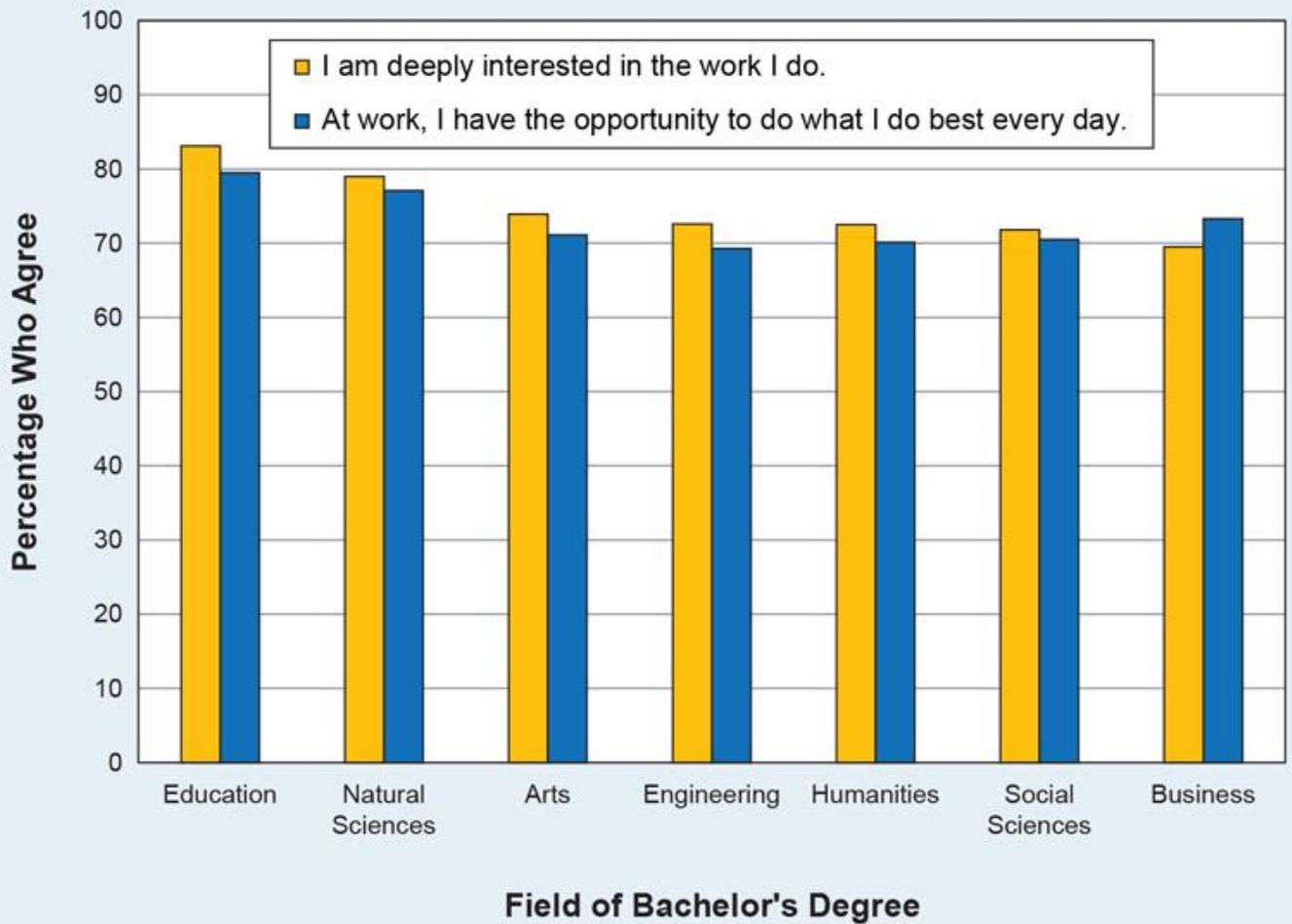
The data in the report also show that large percentages of humanities majors are in supervisory roles, with 60 percent reporting that managing or supervising others is part of their job (a comparable percentage to those graduating in other fields).

And while the data do show some gaps between the perceptions of humanities graduates and others about financial matters, the gaps are much smaller than one would expect to find from articles about dead-end majors leading to jobs at Starbucks.



When it comes to general questions from Gallup about being "deeply interested" in their jobs, the vast majority of humanities grads are -- slightly more than is the case for business or the social sciences, but not far behind engineering.

And for those who think being "deeply interested" would correlate with being well compensated, that does not appear to be the case. Education was the only major where 80 percent of grads were deeply interested.



On another Gallup question, "At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day," humanities graduates were more likely than engineering graduates to answer in the affirmative.

The new report does point to one area where humanities graduates do suffer in comparison with nonhumanities graduates. Thirty percent of graduates with a bachelor's in humanities said their job was closely related to their degree in 2014, while more than a third saw no relationship. Graduates who had majored in business, education and natural sciences were much more likely to view their degree and work as closely related.

Of course, a flip side of that finding is that many humanities students study English or history or philosophy for insights and a way of analyzing the world, without intending their careers to be specifically in English, history or philosophy.

To accompany the report, the academy is releasing [an essay](#) by William D. Adams, senior fellow at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

In the essay, Adams writes that "defenders of the humanities in higher education tend to bristle when the topics of work and the economy come up. The humanities must be about more than jobs and compensation, they reason; we need to prepare students for all of the principal domains of adult life." While Adams writes that such defenders of the humanities are "right, of course," he adds that "questions about the economic returns on investments in higher education are not going away." And he notes that politicians continue to suggest that there may not be a need to educate more people outside of strictly vocational programs.

Reflecting this reality, he writes, projects like the academy's study are important, for showing how humanities graduates are faring, and for improving the quality of education humanities students receive. "In this climate, and for the foreseeable future, several things are true," he writes. "First, we need to know more about how graduates with humanities degrees are doing in the workplace. Second, we need to know more about how the skills the humanities seek to impart -- critical thinking and communication skills, for instance -- actually matter in the workplace. And third, we need to be willing to adjust our views about which humanities aptitudes are significant (or not) in the extraordinarily dynamic workplace of the coming decades. Along the way, we're also going to have to get a better grip on just how well we're doing in fostering the capabilities we deem most relevant to work readiness and success."