



Why Major in Philosophy?

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Source: *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Mar., 1986), pp. 601-606

Published by: American Philosophical Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3131573>

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Issues in the Profession

WHY MAJOR IN PHILOSOPHY?

One of the most frequent queries that I receive as Executive Secretary amounts to the following, in more or less delicately phrased variations: How are those who have chosen undergraduate or graduate study of philosophy faring in the world? Philosophy, as the familiar adage has it, bakes no bread: have philosophers been reduced to begging for theirs?

The query comes, in different ways, from a wide variety of individuals who have an interest in philosophy: from undergraduates who have chosen, or are considering, a philosophy major; from graduate students bracing themselves for their first foray into the job market; from senior members of the profession eager to give accurate and helpful advice to their students and their junior colleagues; from newspaper and magazine writers surveying the state of education and the economy. In what follows I have gathered together some of the bits and pieces of relevant information that I usually provide in response to such inquiries, in the hope that it will be of interest to members of the Association (and that it will diminish somewhat the time spent repeating columns of figures over the telephone).

In this brief report I make no pretense to be exhaustive. Doubtless there are fruitful sources of information that have not come to my attention, and I would very much appreciate members' suggestions in this regard. Rather, I will summarize the information I have gained from a few studies that make it possible (many do not) to examine philosophy separately from other humanities disciplines. In this issue I offer some observations about undergraduate philosophy majors; in the May issue I will turn to employment patterns of philosophy Ph.D.'s.

Philosophy majors are a small and diminishing minority on most campuses. A 1984 profile of undergraduates in the nation's college and universities conducted by the Carnegie Foundation showed that 0.5 percent are majoring or will probably major in philosophy. The number of philosophy majors is only one-fifth the number of English (2.7%) or history (2.5%) majors, but somewhat higher than the number of religion or theology majors (0.3%). There are more than thirty times as many business and management majors as philosophy majors (15.1%). Even music has twice as many majors as philosophy (1.1%). Moreover, only a small number of majors (0.1% of the students) plan to make philosophy their field of graduate study (compared to 0.4% who plan to study history, 0.5% English, 0.4% religion or theology.)¹

A survey of 192,000 freshmen who entered college in 1985 showed that only 0.1 percent planned on majoring in philosophy (and only 1% in English, 0.7% in

history).² Since most students who choose a philosophy major have their first exposure to the subject at the college level, it is unlikely that the same proportion will hold when these students reach graduation.

Much has been made recently by a number of spokesmen for the educational community, including the present Secretary of Education, philosopher William Bennett (not at present a member of the Association), of the sharp decline in the number of students majoring in the humanities in the past two decades. I have not yet located a reliable source of figures which would enable me to track the number of philosophy majors in recent years, but that there has been a decline is undeniable. One must take into consideration, however, the overall trend toward more directly job-related majors in most colleges and universities as well as the increase in the numbers and the kinds of courses taught by philosophy faculty members primarily for non-majors. Has the undergraduate study of philosophy indeed declined across the board, or has the decline in philosophy *majors* been accompanied--as I know it has at my own University--by an increase in philosophy *enrollments*? At the moment I have no such figures to offer, but some light will be shed on this question by the results of the survey mailed to all philosophy chairs in the United States by the APA Committee on the Status and Future of the Profession. (We have received responses to the survey but have not yet completed our analysis of the results; barring unforeseen complications, I hope to be able to report on this survey in the next issue of the *Proceedings and Addresses*.)

Certainly philosophy is better represented on college and university faculties than in undergraduate majors. The Carnegie profile cited above found that members of philosophy departments compose 1.5% of college faculties, compared with 2.8% in history, 0.6% in religion and theology, and 8.4% in English language and literature. Again, these figures for philosophy--as for English--must be viewed in light of classes populated primarily by non-majors. Interestingly, a substantially larger number of the faculty members surveyed (2.5%) were undergraduate philosophy majors. In only a few other disciplines (including French and history) is the ratio of undergraduate majors in a field to faculty affiliation in the same field so high.

But the more urgent question pressed on me by my callers is not *who* is studying philosophy but *why*, and what benefits they obtain thereby. I am sure that all of you begin to answer such questions, as I do, with a brief speech in praise of the pure joys of learning, of philosophical contemplation, and of the life of reason. But this does not always completely satisfy the inquirer.

I have recently received a very extensive study which provides clear evidence that the benefits of studying philosophy can also be observed in much more specific and concrete forms. The study, briefly summarized in the *Proceedings and Addresses* last spring, is a comprehensive review of *The Standardized Test Scores of College Graduates, 1964-1982*, written by Clifford Adelman, Senior Associate of the National Institute of Education.³ Adelman summarizes published data, and some unpublished material provided to him by testing agencies, for 23 standardized tests used in selecting among the applicants to graduate and professional schools. The data he summarizes, conveniently, includes the tests most widely used in admission to graduate programs in the humanities--the verbal and quantitative sections of the Graduate Record Examination--as well as the two most widely known tests for admission to professional programs--the Law School Admissions Test and the Graduate Management Admissions Test.

Over the 19-year period surveyed, scores on a great majority of such standardized tests showed a gradual decline. More precisely, Adelman found that a period of sharp decline (1964-1970) was followed by a period during which scores remained stable or increased slightly (1970-1976) and a period of more moderate decline (1976-1984). It is difficult to draw any clear conclusions from this pattern, because at least a portion of this pattern has resulted from changes in the tests themselves and in methods and standards for scoring them. It is clear, however, that the sharpest declines were in tests which measure verbal skills.

The author of the study professes himself puzzled by many of the correlations which emerge from close study of the data: "most of the relationships between numbers of test-takers and trends in scores," he observes, "are counter-intuitive" (p. 6). None of the basic demographic variables of age, race, or gender is sufficient to explain the changes observed. Nor does the increasing number of foreign students, and of test-takers with limited fluency in English, correlate strongly with the observed scores: when these students are removed from the population studied, the overall patterns remain essentially unchanged.

Only one variable stood out in Adelman's study as correlating significantly, and consistently, with test scores: *the undergraduate major of the test-takers*. Three of Adelman's conclusions warrant quotation in full:

- (1) With the exception of engineering majors, undergraduates who major in professional and occupational fields, consistently *underperform* those who major in traditional arts and sciences fields on these examinations. (p. 31)
- (2) Students with undergraduate majors in [natural] science, mathematics, and engineering perform better than all others on these examinations. (p. 33)

But the author immediately notes an important exception to the second conclusion: the list of majors that are consistently at the top of the list in test scores includes "some non-scientific fields, e.g., economics and philosophy." (Ask your colleagues in economics how they like this grouping and this label!) So he formulates a more precise statement of his second conclusion:

- (3) Students who major in a field characterized by formal thought, structural relationships, abstract models, symbolic languages, and deductive reasoning consistently outperform others on these examinations. (p. 33)

A fourth conclusion drawn from the data studied seems to me more dubious:

- (4) Even as the numbers of their majors decline, the Humanities disciplines are witnessing their best students going on to professional school, not graduate school. But we cannot reach the same conclusion concerning the social sciences. (p. 34)

The author himself presents information which renders this conclusion doubtful: over the period studied, the percentage of humanities majors who have taken the tests studied has remained nearly constant. There has been a steep decline in the number of students taking the GRE Area Tests in English and History in recent years, while at the same time scores on these tests declined markedly. Adelman takes this as evidence that the best students in history and English were taking professional-school tests instead. But it may merely reflect the diminishing confidence of graduate-school admissions committees in the reliability of the GRE Area Tests. The Area Test in philosophy was discontinued in recent years because the numbers who took it were small, but the small numbers reflected the small number of graduate philosophy departments who required it for admission.

The accompanying tables, drawn from Adelman's report, show vividly just how strong a correlation there is between undergraduate major and performance on standardized tests--and how well philosophy majors, in particular, have performed in comparison with other humanities majors and majors in nearly all other disciplines. I include here the complete data for 1981-82, comparing philosophy majors with all other majors in that two-year period, as well as comparative data for the eight years preceding for philosophy majors only. The variation between years is small, and the pattern of philosophy majors' performance is remarkably consistent: in none of the two-year periods did philosophy majors perform worse than average on any of the tests included in the survey, and in each year the percentage by which they exceeded the average was within 2 percent of the figures for 1981-82.

Permit me to call attention to a few of the remarkable results of this extensive survey:

- Philosophy majors performed substantially better than the average (5% better or more) on each of the tests surveyed. Not one other group of majors shows this consistent pattern--not even economics or the physical sciences, whose majors did exceptionally well in three of the four areas but only marginally better than average on the verbal portion of the GRE. (Biology majors performed better than average on all tests, but the margins were consistently smaller than those of philosophy majors.)
- On the LSAT and GMAT--tests which few students would think to prepare for by studying Socrates and Kant--philosophy majors performed substantially better than majors in any other humanities field, better than all social science majors except economics, better than all natural science majors except mathematics, and better than all business and applied fields, including engineering.
- On the verbal portion of the GRE, philosophy majors outperformed all other humanities majors--only English came close--and all other fields.
- On the quantitative portion of the GRE, philosophy majors were outdistanced by natural science, economics, engineering, and

computer science majors; but they alone among humanities majors scored higher than the average, and they did better than all social sciences except economics.

These results no doubt reflect other factors besides the brilliance and intellectual rigor which mark all of our philosophy classes. The number of majors, we have noted, is small, and students may choose philosophy because they already possess some of the reasoning skills that enable them to perform well on standardized tests. (Other studies show, however, that the correlation between performance on college entrance tests, a measure of prior intellectual ability, and graduate admissions tests is limited.) And I hardly need add that the aims of education in philosophy have far more to do with broad and deep intellectual development than with a finely honed ability to pick correct answers on standardized tests, darken the proper circle and make no stray marks on the answer sheet.

But perhaps these results may give some encouragement to students who have mixed feelings about devoting so much of their time in college to a subject which appears at times to offer little immediate benefit. I have reproduced them here in the hope that members of the Association will share them with students, with colleagues in other disciplines, and with administrators and parents who may occasionally require assurance that the pursuit of truth, justice, and beauty can not only improve students' souls but also help get them into law school. In the next issue I will offer some information about what students who pursue philosophy past the B.A. have found when they reached the job market.

ENDNOTES

¹Carnegie Survey of Undergraduates, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1986; summarized in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 5, 1986, pp. 27-30.

²Alexander Astin, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1985*, published by American Council on Education and University of California at Los Angeles; summarized in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jan. 15, 1986, pp. 35-36.

³Copies of the unpublished report may be obtained from the Educational Resources Information Center, an agency of the U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. 20202.

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Executive Secretary

TEST PERFORMANCE BY UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR, 1981-82

Total number of respondents: 398,768

Table lists percentages by which majors in each field scored above or below the mean scores of all test-takers in 1981-82.

Undergraduate major	LSAT	GMAT	---- GRE ----		Size of sample
			Verbal	Quant.	
HUMANITIES					
Philosophy	8.7%	11.0%	17.6%	4.6%	3,410
English	5.6%	4.1%	14.5%	-5.7%	17,757
History	2.9%	4.6%	10.8%	-5.5%	15,123
Foreign languages	5.7%	3.3%	7.9%	-4.2%	7,068
Arts and Music	-0.5%	-1.2%	1.7%	-8.4%	9,670
Other humanities	4.7%	1.8%	7.3%	-5.0%	8,341
SOCIAL SCIENCES					
Economics	9.6%	7.3%	0.8%	12.4%	17,562
Government	3.3%	4.6%	(Included below)		
Political Science	-1.6%	0.6%	3.5%	-5.0%	27,337
Psychology	0.9%	0.8%	3.1%	-4.0%	24,885
Sociology	-0.7%	-0.5%	-0.7%	-1.5%	8,693
Anthropology	4.0%		16.4%	-1.7%	1,863
NATURAL SCIENCE					
Biology and bioscience	4.0%	3.3%	5.4%	8.0%	22,820
Chemistry	7.6%	7.5%	2.1%	18.3%	6,867
Mathematics	12.8%	13.3%	2.7%	26.3%	6,564
Physics			6.6%	29.5%	3,183
Other science	2.8%	0.8%	3.5%	14.5%	9,154
BUSINESS					
Accounting	3.4%	-1.5%	} (All bus. majors:)	-9.1%	-2.3%
Finance	3.4%	-0.8%			
Marketing		-8.1%			
Business admin.	-4.5%				
Management	-5.4%	-7.7%			
Other business	-0.9%	-5.0%			77,679
OTHER MAJORS					
Computer science		5.4%	-1.5%	22.9%	5,035
Engineering	8.0%	10.0%	-7.3%	25.1%	29,718
Journalism	0.7%		5.7%	-8.6%	2,767
Social work	-10.1%		-9.1%	-20.8%	2,999
Speech	-2.7%		-6.0%	-14.3%	2,159
Education	-8.7%	-4.2%	-10.4%	-15.8%	22,978
SUMMARY OF COMPARATIVE DATA FOR PHILOSOPHY MAJORS, 1977-1982					
Academic year 1977-78	8.9%	11.2%	18.4%	5.4%	
Academic year 1978-79	8.6%	9.9%	19.4%	5.2%	
Academic year 1979-80	7.2%	10.8%	19.5%	5.0%	
Academic year 1980-81	8.8%	11.4%	17.9%	3.3%	
Academic year 1981-82	8.7%	11.0%	17.6%	4.6%	

SOURCE: Clifford Adelman, Standardized Test Scores (see ref. in text)