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The Philosophy Major at

UMSL
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1. What is philosophy? .........................................................2
2. Careers...........................................................................3
3. Salaries...........................................................................4
4. Graduate school..............................................................5
5. Professional school.........................................................6
6. Standing apart from the crowd........................................7
7. Details.............................................................................8
8. Newspapers articles about the philosophy major............9
1. What is philosophy?

There are several different ways to think about what philosophy is.

One is by subject matter. Most of the subjects you already know about – physics, psychology, economics – were once considered philosophy. In Germany a couple hundred years ago, philosophy was the name of any branch of study that was not either law, theology or medicine. That’s why the highest degree in most fields is a Ph.D., which is a Doctorate in Philosophy. Philosophy is just about everything.

But philosophy is also the discipline that questions things that other fields usually take for granted. How does causation work? Can you exist after your bodily death? Do computers think? Why is it wrong to torture people? Is affirmative action just? Could we be massively deceived about our world? Is truth relative? These questions are not just fun to consider. Answers to them serve as the foundations for the kind of work done by specialists in other fields. And it’s by overturning old dogmas that new fields are spawned. Philosophy is about the future as much as it is the past.

Even so, perhaps the most useful way to think about philosophy is by considering its methods. It is a cliché to say that philosophers think critically. But it is true. And by doing philosophy, you will learn how to think, write, and speak better than you otherwise could. You will be able to quickly identify the hidden assumptions others make. You will be able to spot fallacies easily. You will be able to construct sound arguments. Those who study philosophy think more rigorously than anyone else. This helps you not only in your career, but in every aspect of your life. You will even be able to spot it if an academic brochure, such as this, is trying to pull a fast one on you.

These last two points are connected. It is because the kinds of issues philosophers focus upon are so abstract and important, it becomes necessary to think in a very logical and hard-headed manner in order to gain any intellectual traction and make progress. You don’t learn how to think well by studying the easy stuff.
2. Careers

Majoring in philosophy is not a way to get a specific job. If you want that—a job that will not be outsourced overseas right after you accumulate a lot of student loans—you should consider studying to become an electrician, a brickmason, a plumber, or some other skilled trade. These are lucrative and noble careers.

If, however, you are instead working on your Bachelor’s degree, you probably hope to become some sort of knowledge worker. Such work is vulnerable not only to overseas outsourcing, but also to technological disruption. The average person doing such work will have several different kinds of careers in his or her lifetime. The days that a knowledge worker does the same thing for forty years in a row are almost over.

In light of that, how can you best prepare for knowledge work? It will do you no good just to memorize a bunch of information that employers can retrieve electronically. It costs them far less to use Google than to hire you. Instead, you must demonstrate to potential employers that you can quickly learn how to do whatever they need done. Employers do not want to hire people who (already) know only one particular thing. They want to hire smart people who can adapt as circumstances demand.

To do this, you need to show that you are smart, that you can analyze problems, and that you know how to write clearly and concisely. Philosophy, fortunately, is a remarkably hard-headed discipline. We won’t name names, but there is a lot of sloppy thinking elsewhere in the academy. Employers do not want employees who merely can parrot what others say. They want employees who can understand the strengths and weaknesses of various ways of doing things, and who can teach themselves how to implement the best way. Philosophy teaches you to do just that.

Those who have majored in philosophy at UMSL are now—among other things—professors, physicians, contractors, information systems specialists, pilots, attorneys, statisticians, entrepreneurs, organizational presidents and a host of other professionals.
3. Salaries

Can you major in philosophy and still get a job with a decent salary? That is what every student, and every student's parent, wants to know. Let us look at data.

According to Payscale.com, the average salary for a philosophy major straight out of college right now is $39,671. This is slightly lower than the average for all majors ($42,196), which includes things like engineering. Still, it is higher than psychology ($36,424) and about the same as biology ($39,628) and criminology ($40,000).

For those who majored in philosophy 15 years ago, the average salary is now $74,764. This is slightly higher than the average for all majors: $73,811. And compare philosophy to the average salary for those who majored in business administration ($64,861) or psychology ($65,619) 15 years ago. Those who major in philosophy acquire the skills to rapidly climb organizational ladders. They do not get stuck at the bottom, doing the same thing over and over and over their entire lives. This is a good thing.

For more information, see:


"Business Educators Struggle to Put Students to Work", in The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 21, 2011:


Majoring in philosophy may not be the quickest path to wealth. But it is a good path for lifelong happiness. These salary averages are for people with no academic degree beyond the Bachelor’s degree. But can majoring in philosophy help you if you choose to go to graduate or professional school instead?
4. Graduate school

If you might go to graduate school, but aren’t sure in what, majoring in philosophy is the best preparation available.

To enter graduate school, you will have to take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). The GRE has three sections: Analytical Writing, Verbal Reasoning and Quantitative Reasoning. Educational Testing Services compares average GRE scores by intended major.

For the Analytical Writing section, philosophy majors scored higher than every other major (4.4 out of 5).

For the Verbal Reasoning section, philosophy majors scored higher than every other major (160 out of 170).

For the Quantitative Reasoning section, philosophy majors scored 153 out of 170, which is higher than every other Humanities major.

Those majoring clearly do better on the GRE than those of any other major.

Those who major in philosophy as an undergraduate are often admitted to graduate programs in other fields, because admissions committees understand how well-prepared philosophy students are.
5. Professional school

If you instead hope to go to professional school, majoring in philosophy is still the best preparation available.

To apply to law school, you will have to take the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). Of majors with at least 1900 students taking the LSAT, philosophy and economics are tied for the highest score (157.4 out of 180). Only the comparatively few physics/math majors did better (160).

A study of the 2001 Law School Entering Class by Professor Carol Leach of Chicago State University shows that the overall acceptance rate for philosophy majors is second only to physics majors.

To apply to medical school, you will have to take the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). The MCAT does not publish average scores by specific major. But they do report that humanities majors (29.4), which includes philosophy, score better than those majoring in biological sciences (28.1). The most recent available data report that philosophy majors are admitted to medical school at the second highest rate of all majors (50.2% admitted).

Note further that the the format of the MCAT is changing, and will soon add “a new ‘Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills’ section [that] will test students’ reasoning ability by having them analyze, evaluate, and apply information provided in passages from a wide range of social sciences and humanities disciplines, including ethics and philosophy…”

To apply to business school, you will have to take the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT). In 2010-11, the average GMAT score for philosophy majors was 599, third only to math and physics. The average for undergraduate business majors was 525. The overall average was 494. If you want to get an MBA, studying philosophy is very good preparation.

Those who major in philosophy are highly prized by admissions committees at a wide variety of professional schools.
6. Standing apart from the crowd

What will distinguish you from the dozens or hundreds of other people applying for the same jobs and graduate school slots you are?

At UMSL alone, there are over 600 biology majors, over 600 criminology majors, over 700 psychology majors, and over 1600 business administration majors. Do you want a resume that’s nearly identical to all those other applicants?

In the philosophy department, there are about 40 majors, or 10 each year. You can get the individualized attention and support you need to become a better student and a better person. If you felt lost or overlooked in high school, but you still want to go to a real research university, majoring in philosophy at UMSL is probably one of the best options you have.

UMSL has a few nationally ranked degree programs. The Department of Philosophy has one of them:
7. **Details**

You need 120 credit hours to earn a Bachelor’s degree. You need 30 credit hours of course work in philosophy to earn the major. At least 18 of these credit hours must be at the 3000 level or higher. If you plan well, this is easily doable, especially when you consider that some of your philosophy coursework can count toward your General Education requirements.

There are also some particular distribution requirements to fulfill while you accumulate your 30 credit hours:

1) **History of Philosophy**, two courses:
   - PHIL 1110, History of Western Philosophy I or PHIL 3301, Ancient History
   - PHIL 1111, History of Western Philosophy II or PHIL 3303, Early Modern Philosophy

2) **Logic**, one of the following:
   - PHIL 1160, Logic and Language or PHIL 3360, Introduction to Formal Logic

3) **Normative Philosophy**, one of the following:
   - PHIL 1130, Approaches to Ethics, PHIL 4430, Social and Political Philosophy,
   - PHIL 4435, Classical Ethical Theories, or PHIL 4438, Recent Ethical Theory

4) **Junior Level Requirement**, one of the following:
   - Any 3000 level History of Philosophy course not used to satisfy the History of Philosophy Requirement (#1) above (e.g. PHIL 3301 to PHIL 3307),
   - PHIL 3374, Philosophy of Art, PHIL 3378, Philosophy of Mind, or
   - PHIL 3380, Philosophy of Science.

5) **Core Requirement**, one of the following:
   - PHIL 4440, Theories of Knowledge or PHIL 4445, Metaphysics

6) **Senior Seminar**: PHIL 4491.

There are also optional Tracks within the major, so you can take courses specializing in a particular area. Our tracks are: Pre-Law, Science Studies, Psychology and Neuroscience, Ethics and Society, Health Sciences, and History of Philosophy.

To discuss whether and how to major in philosophy, see either:

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In a New Generation of College Students, Many Opt for the Life Examined
By WINNIE HU

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. — When a fellow student at Rutgers University urged Didi Onejeme to try Philosophy 101 two years ago, Ms. Onejeme, who was a pre-med sophomore, dismissed it as “frou-frou.”

“People sitting under trees and talking about stupid stuff — I mean, who cares?” Ms. Onejeme recalled thinking at the time.

But Ms. Onejeme, now a senior applying to law school, ended up changing her major to philosophy, which she thinks has armed her with the skills to be successful. “My mother was like, what are you going to do with that?” said Ms. Onejeme, 22. “She wanted me to be a pharmacy major, but I persuaded her with my argumentative skills.”

Once scoffed at as a luxury major, philosophy is being embraced at Rutgers and other universities by a new generation of college students who are drawing modern-day lessons from the age-old discipline as they try to make sense of their world, from the morality of the war in Iraq to the latest political scandal. The economic downturn has done little, if anything, to dampen this enthusiasm among students, who say that what they learn in class can translate into practical skills and careers.

On many campuses, debate over modern issues like war and technology is emphasized over the study of classic ancient texts.

Rutgers, which has long had a top-ranked philosophy department, is one of a number of universities where the number of undergraduate philosophy majors is ballooning; there are 100 in this year’s graduating class, up from 50 in 2002, even as overall enrollment on the main campus has declined by 4 percent.

At the City University of New York, where enrollment is up 18 percent over the past six years, there are 322 philosophy majors, a 51 percent increase since 2002.

“If I were to start again as an undergraduate, I would major in philosophy,” said Matthew Goldstein, the CUNY chancellor, who majored in mathematics and statistics. “I think that subject is really at the core of just about everything we do. If you study humanities or political systems or sciences in general, philosophy is really the mother ship from which all of these disciplines grow.”

Nationwide, there are more colleges offering undergraduate philosophy programs today than a decade ago (817, up from 765), according to the College Board. Some schools with established programs like Texas A&M, Notre Dame, the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, now have twice as many philosophy majors as they did in the 1990s.

David E. Schrader, executive director of the American Philosophical Association, a professional organization with 11,000 members, said that in an era in which people change careers frequently, philosophy makes sense. “It’s a major that helps them become quick learners and gives them strong skills in writing, analysis and critical thinking,” he said.

Mr. Schrader, an adjunct professor at the University of Delaware, said that the demand for philosophy courses had outpaced the resources at some colleges, where students are often turned away. Some are enrolling in online courses instead, he said, describing it as “really very strange.”
“The discipline as we see it from the time of Socrates starts with people face to face, putting their positions on the table,” he said.

The Rutgers philosophy department is relatively large, with 27 professors, 60 graduate students, and more than 30 undergraduate offerings each semester. For those who cannot get enough of their Descartes in class, there is the Wednesday night philosophy club, where, last week, 11 students debated the metaphysics behind the movie “The Matrix” for more than an hour.

An undergraduate philosophy journal started this semester has drawn 36 submissions — about half from Rutgers students — on musings like “Is the extinction of a species always a bad thing?”

Barry Loewer, the department chairman, said that Rutgers started building its philosophy program in the late 1980s, when the field was branching into new research areas like cognitive science and becoming more interdisciplinary. He said that many students have double-majored in philosophy and, say, psychology or economics, in recent years, and go on to become doctors, lawyers, writers, investment bankers and even commodities traders.

As the approach has changed, philosophy has attracted students with little interest in contemplating the classical texts, or what is known as armchair philosophy. Some, like Ms. Onejeme, the pre-med-student-turned-philosopher, who is double majoring in political science, see it as a pre-law track because it emphasizes the verbal and logic skills prized by law schools — something the Rutgers department encourages by pointing out that their majors score high on the LSAT.

Other students said that studying philosophy, with its emphasis on the big questions and alternative points of view, provided good training for looking at larger societal questions, like globalization and technology.

“All of these things make the world a smaller place and force us to look beyond the bubble we grow up in,” said Christine Bullman, 20, a junior, who said art majors and others routinely took philosophy classes. “I think philosophy is a good base to look at a lot of issues.”

Frances Egan, a Rutgers philosophy professor who advises undergraduates, said that as it has become harder for students to predict what specialties might be in demand in an uncertain economy, some may be more apt to choose their major based simply on what they find interesting. “Philosophy is a lot of fun,” said Professor Egan, who graduated with a philosophy degree in the tough economic times of the 1970s. “A lot of students are in it because they find it intellectually rewarding.”

Max Bialek, 22, was majoring in math until his senior year, when he discovered philosophy. He decided to stay an extra year to complete the major (his parents needed reassurance, he said, but were supportive).

“I thought: Why weren’t all my other classes like that one?” he said, explaining that philosophy had taught him a way of studying that could be applied to any subject and enriched his life in unexpected ways. “You can talk about almost anything as long as you do it well.”

Jenna Schaal-O’Connor, a 20-year-old sophomore who is majoring in cognitive science and linguistics, said philosophy had other perks. She said she found many male philosophy majors interesting and sensitive. “That whole deep existential torment,” she said. “It’s good for getting girlfriends.”
I think, therefore I earn

Philosophy graduates are suddenly all the rage with employers. What can they possibly have to offer?

Jessica Shepherd  The Guardian, Monday 19 November 2007

"A degree in philosophy? What are you going to do with that then?"
Philosophy students will tell you they’ve been asked this question more times than they care to remember.
"The response people seem to want is a cheery shrug and a jokey 'don't know'," says Joe Cunningham, 20, a final-year philosophy undergraduate at Heythrop College, University of London.
A more accurate comeback, according to the latest statistics, is "just about anything I want". Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show philosophy graduates, once derided as unemployable layabouts, are in growing demand from employers. The number of all graduates in full-time and part-time work six months after graduation has risen by 9% between 2002-03 and 2005-06; for philosophy graduates it has gone up by 13%.
It is in the fields of finance, property development, health, social work and the nebulous category of "business" that those versed in Plato and Kant are most sought after. In "business", property development, renting and research, 76% more philosophy graduates were employed in 2005-06 than in 2002-03. In health and social work, 9% more.
The Higher Education Careers Services Unit (Hecsu), which also collates data of this kind, agrees philosophers are finding it easier to secure work. Its figures show that, in 2001, 9.9% of philosophy graduates were unemployed six months after graduation. In 2006, just 6.7% were. On average, 6% of all graduates were unemployed six months after graduation.
In 2001, 9.3% of philosophy graduates were in business and finance roles six months after graduation. In 2006, 12.2% were. In 2001, 5.3% were in marketing and advertising six months after graduation. In 2006, 7.3% were.
It is particularly significant that the percentage finding full-time work six months after graduation has risen, since the number of philosophy graduates has more than doubled between 2001 and 2006. In 2001, UK universities produced 895 graduates with a first degree in the discipline; in 2006, they produced 2,040.
And it is so popular with its graduates that many go on to postgraduate study rather than join the workforce. Charlie Ball, who runs Hecsu's labour market analysis, says: "More philosophy graduates are being produced, and they are much less likely to be unemployed than five years ago."
Philosophers have always come in handy in the workplace with their grounding in analytical thinking. Why, only now, are they so prized by employers?

Open mind

Lucy Adams, human resources director of Serco, a services business and a consultancy firm, says: "Philosophy lies at the heart of our approach to recruiting and developing our leadership, and our leaders. We need people who have the ability to look for different approaches and take an open mind to issues. These skills are promoted by philosophical approaches."
Fiona Czerniawska, director of the Management Consultancies Association's think tank, says: "A philosophy degree has trained the individual's brain and given them the ability to provide management-consulting firms with the sort of skills that they require and clients demand. These skills can include the ability to be very analytical, provide clear and innovative thinking, and question assumptions."
Deborah Bowman, associate dean for widening participation at St George's, University of London, which offers medicine and health sciences courses, says philosophers are increasingly sought after by the NHS: "Graduates of philosophy who come in to graduate-entry medicine, or to nursing courses, are very useful. Growth areas in the NHS include clinical ethicists, who assist doctors and nurses. Medical ethics committees and ethics
training courses for staff are also growing. More and more people are needed to comment on moral issues in healthcare, such as abortion."

Being on an ethics committee of the NHS is something Cunningham is looking into. "It would be a direct application of my skills," he says.

The popular philosopher Simon Blackburn, a professor at Cambridge University, sees the improving career prospects of philosophy graduates as part of a wider change of public perception. "I guess the public image of a philosopher has tended to concentrate on an ancient Greek in a toga, or some unwashed hippy lying around not doing very much," he says. "I do detect a change in the way the public sees philosophers. I have been pleasantly surprised by the number of people who come to philosophy events nowadays."

Blackburn can take some credit. The user-friendly books on philosophy that he and other philosophers such as AC Grayling, Stephen Law, Julian Baggini, Nigel Warburton and Alain de Botton write have made their way into the mainstream. **Course design**

Those in charge of designing university courses have also become sensitive to claims that their subject has no relevance to the modern day.

Blackburn says: "In the years after the second world war, there was a sort of Wittgensteinian air about philosophy, which meant practitioners were proud of the fact that they appeared slightly esoteric and were not doing anything practical. There was very little political philosophy, and moral philosophy was disengaged from people's actual moral problems, and that did lead to the subject being marginalised. That has changed. Political philosophy is a central part of the Cambridge course."

Jonathan Lowe, professor of philosophy at Durham University, agrees that courses' concern with the real world has accelerated in the past five years.

"It's probably because of the new financial arrangements for students that courses have had to prove they are applicable to real world issues," he says. "And the teaching methods have changed. There are more student-led sessions. Students have to argue on their feet and give presentations. That probably shows at interviews."

News that employers and the public hold philosophers in higher regard should presumably be cause for celebration? Not entirely, says Blackburn. "It is also slightly worrying, because people turn to philosophers when they feel less confident and more insecure."
Philosophers Find the Degree Pays Off in Life And in Work

26 December 1997 | New York Times
by CAROL MARIE CROPPER

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. – What can you do with a philosophy degree? In an age of M.B.A.’s and computer scientists, more than 4,000 American college students graduate each year with a bachelor’s degree in the ancient discipline. Sometimes their parents and friends wonder what will happen to them.

One thing is certain: Not many of them will go on to make a living as philosophers. Even those who persevere through a doctorate may wind up doing something else. More than 1,000 people with Ph.D’s in philosophy applied for the 448 openings listed in the last year in “Jobs for Philosophers,” said Eric Hoffman, executive director of the American Philosophical Association. And many of those jobs were temporary or nontenure-track teaching positions.

Yet students majoring in philosophy – the study of the principles underlying conduct, thought and knowledge – seem passionately unconcerned.

Shaharyar Khan, a philosophy major at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, is one of a handful of seniors selected to live in the early 19th-century academic village designed here by Thomas Jefferson. He awakens each morning in a dormitory room that opens onto the university’s mist-covered lawn, with the rotunda that Jefferson modeled on the Pantheon rising to his left.

“We look at what we do, how we justify things,” the 22-year-old said of his philosophy classes. “In that there is sublimity and nobility.”

Mr. Khan plans to go to medical school – if he is not seduced by an academic career. He considered majoring in a science but decided he would get enough of that later. Philosophy was his personal luxury. “This was something I could do for myself,” he said

For some, an accidental major can shape careers outside academia.

But what of other philosophy majors? What do they do when confronted with the real world, where there are groceries to buy and mortgages to pay? How do they compete for jobs with all those sensible accounting and engineering majors?

For all the jokes about them, philosophy majors appear to do remarkably well. That, at least, is the conclusion one can draw from an unscientific survey, 20 years after graduation, of the class of 1977 at four schools: Princeton University, the University of Virginia, the University of Nebraska and Texas A & M University.

These 40-somethings fell in love with philosophy almost by accident and went on to careers in other fields. But for the most part they are convinced that their studies, which covered logic and ethics among other topics, helped them in their jobs and their lives.

Their professional success may stem from the fact that philosophy students seem more likely than those with other degrees to attend graduate or professional school. Of 20 philosophy majors interviewed from the four universities, only four had not added a graduate or professional degree.

“I suppose I’m lucky I got into medical school,” said Joseph P. Bruner, who graduated from Nebraska. “I would have probably wound up parking cars otherwise.”

Or maybe not. Jorge Secada, director of undergraduate studies in philosophy at Virginia, said his students almost always found jobs—though not in philosophy. “We are doing better in finding employment for graduates than most majors in the arts and sciences area,” he said.

“Apparently people in the real world think philosophy majors are well trained. They are trained to think, to analyze. They express themselves well. They write.”

At Texas A & M, philosophy majors – like math and music students – are benefiting these days from a job market desperate for computer scientists, said Dr. Leigh Turner, director of the university’s career center. Students with such majors are thought to have an aptitude for technology jobs, she said.

In the early days of this century philosophy was thought of as fundamental to a well-rounded liberal arts education, Mr. Hoffman of the American Philosophical Association said. Considered more than just the teachings of Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, philosophy was regarded as a broad search for knowledge, encompassing the latest scientific and social theories.
But that was before those concerns became independent fields of study, leaving philosophy with a narrower focus. And it was before college-age baby boomers gave way to a baby bust. Cash-starved colleges started looking for departments to trim. And students, watching the cost of a college education at selective private schools soar, turned into pragmatic consumers weighing the economic value of a diploma that could put them in debt by more than $100,000.

By 1994, one survey found that a philosophy course was required at only 18 percent of colleges, Mr. Hofman said. Between 1992 and 1996, more than 400 standalone philosophy departments disappeared, according to the Directory of American Philosophers. Schools offering a major in the subject slipped from 683 to 660; those offering even scattered courses plummeted from 947 to 606.

The leap from Aristotle to computers can be a short one.

All this occurred despite the fact that philosophy, in the last 20 years, has taken a more marketable turn as the issues faced in industry and the professions have grown more complex.

Dr. Bruner’s career hints at the changes. He heads a medical team, including two ethicists, at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville that developed a surgical procedure for repairing spina bifida in fetuses. The procedure raised several ethical issues – whether, for instance, it is appropriate to perform an operation that could kill a fetus incapable of giving consent to repair a condition that is not life-threatening.

“We’ve published almost as many articles on the ethics issues as on the medical issues,” Dr. Bruner said.

While so many other schools were cutting back, Princeton has maintained what is widely considered one of the best philosophy departments in the country. Its famous graduates – include Carl C. Icahn, the financier, who earned his B.A. in 1957, his senior thesis was titled “The Problem of Formulating an Adequate Explication of the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning.” Philosophy majors in the class of 1977 have spent the last two decades building striking resumes – just not in philosophy.

Jay M. Behmke, 42, did what so many philosophy majors do: He became a lawyer. But he built a practical career with a twist. After a few years in corporate law, followed by a year teaching in France as a Fulbright Scholar, Mr. Behmke returned to American wine country and became the chief financial officer at a winery. He then opened a law practice in Sonoma County, Calif.; representing vineyards.

“Some days I’m sorry I didn’t go on as a professor, because I did have a some things to say,” said Mr. Behmke, who taught undergraduate philosophy courses at Yale while attending law school there. “I have a fantasy of making a fortune and retiring early and teaching philosophy.”

More men than women study philosophy; Nanci Heller McAlpin, a freelance writer in Manhattan, was the lone female philosophy major in Princeton’s class of 1977. She knew from the start that she was not earning a practical degree.

“When we entered the department, we were handed a paper and it said, ‘Why not to go to graduate school in philosophy,’” Ms. McAlpin recalled.

Such discouragements by Princeton and other schools apparently worked. The number of students earning doctorates in philosophy dropped to 298 in 1995 from 382 in 1976 and dipped as low as 215 in 1984, according to various studies.

But almost 92 percent of those with doctorates in philosophy were employed full time in 1995, compared with 85 percent of those with music Ph.D.’s and 87 percent with Ph.D.’s in art history, according to a study by the National Research Council. The median income for philosophy Ph.D.’s that year was $46,800, compared with median 1995 earnings of $48,100 for engineers and $124,000 for family doctors.

Unlike students who choose a major with a career in mind, philosophers typically fall into the subject by taking a class they enjoy, said Mr. Secada of the University of Virginia. One recent day here, students listened as Prof. James Cargile lectured on the utilitarian theory of justice, which holds that justice can be arrived at by weighing such things as the total happiness an act produces. But if that makes sense, he asked, should the person who enjoys wealth the most have more of it than others? In another class, Richard Rorty, one of the nation’s best-known philosophers, discussed Nietzsche’s thoughts on homosexuality and celibacy.

Like Princeton’s, Virginia’s class of ’77 produced its share of lawyers, but graduates also headed for such typical philosophers’ occupations as medicine and computing. And some who chose law came to it circuitously.
After graduation, Ralph Gilbert returned to a profession of which Jefferson would have approved. He raised soybeans, sheep and pigs on his family’s North Carolina farm for five years before drought, corn mold and mounting debt drove him from farming into law. Mr. Gilbert, who is 45, said he still read philosophy and enjoyed philosophical discussions with a friend who is an Episcopal minister. He toys with the idea of going back to school for a divinity degree. But he credits philosophy with helping him neither in farming nor law; it has only improved his life.

“I think it influences the way I go about doing things,” Mr. Gilbert said. “I think it’s given me a sense of the complications that we face as human beings. It gives me a sense of the beauty and wonder of life. It helps me understand people in dire circumstances.” Of all the gifts that his philosophy degree has given him, said Dr. Bruner, the Nebraska graduate, creativity is probably the most important. Those who majored in science, the headed straight for medical school and years of practice can have a narrow outlook, he said. “They don’t have enough raw data outside their scientific training to provide those insights, those flashes of creativity,” he said.

Philosophy has many strains, of course – not all of them quite so evocative of those moments of Romantic inspiration. Briggs Myrick, a 1977 Texas A&M graduate, became a sales clerk and manager at a hardware store after college. But within three years – and without further training – he was programming computers at the university. The leap was easy, he said: A lot of early computer scientists were philosophers.

“In philosophy, we study logic,” he said. “We have a very mathematical way of going about it. Computers are a lot like that as well.” Both philosophers and computer programmers use Boolean logic, Mr. Myrick explained, though philosophers are more likely to call it Aristotelian logic. “Any assertion is either true or false,” he said. “If it is true or false, it can be on or off. And it can be a switch. And computers have a lot of little, tiny switches.”

Of course, philosophy majors work in fields other than law, medicine and computer science—especially if they set out into the working world with just a bachelor’s degree. One Princeton graduate shelved books in libraries to support his interest in acting before returning to school years later for a master’s degree in library science. One 1977 Virginia graduate sells herbs and flowers; another owns a service station. Some 1977 philosophy graduates earn less than $30,000 a year, the herb seller expects to clear $6,000 in 1997. But more common are incomes of $50,000 or $60,000, and a few darn more than $200,000.

Money aside, Dr. Bruner figures that his philosophy degree helped make his medical career possible – though there were moments of doubt. The 44-year-old obstetrician still recalls sitting before the admissions panel at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine, scrambling to explain why he wanted to be a doctor after majoring in philosophy.

“I told them that I could get a medical degree and still, to some extent, practice philosophy,” he said. “But if I stayed in philosophy and tried to practice medicine, they’d probably try to put me in jail.

“Not one of them cracked a smile.”
Study of philosophy makes gains despite economy

By Jeff Gammage, Inquirer Staff Writer
POSTED: October 15, 2011

Shannon Maloney had already earned a degree in mechanical engineering, but she returned to Lehigh University for a fifth year to complete a second major she knows will make her more employable:

Philosophy.

Yep, philosophy.

Though philosophy is routinely dismissed and disparaged - as useless as English, as dead as Latin, as diminished as library science - more college students are getting degrees in that field than ever before.

Though the overall figures remain small, the number of four-year graduates has grown 46 percent in a decade, surpassing the growth rates of much bigger programs such as psychology and history.

In an era in which chronic unemployment seems to demand hard skills, some students are turning to an ancient study that they say prepares them not for a job, but for the multiple jobs they expect to hold during their lifetimes.

"It's teaching me to see the big picture and to think about things in a different way," said Maloney, 22, of West Chester. "Not only can I do the math and figure out how to design something and build something, but I can see it in the context of a business plan."

To be sure, the giant majors of business, education, and engineering attract exponentially more students than philosophy, whose graduates account for about 1 percent of all bachelor's degrees in the United States. But at a time when some majors have faded to near-extinction, philosophy is showing gains.

Nationally, 12,444 students received degrees in philosophy or religious studies in 2008-09, the latest year for which federal figures are available, up from 8,506 in 1998-99. That 46 percent increase occurred during a period when the total number of four-year college graduates grew at a slower 33 percent.

During that span, the number of students earning social-science and history degrees went up 35 percent, psychology was up 28 percent, and education actually went down, falling 5 percent.

"The demise of philosophy, and, more generally, of the liberal arts, is grossly exaggerated," said Jeff Robbins, a professor of religion and philosophy at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pa.

The word philosophy comes from the Greek philosophia, meaning "love of wisdom," and its study is defined as, well, even philosophers can't agree on an exact interpretation. Plato described it as "the science of the idea."
Generally, philosophy seeks to answer the deepest questions of why we are here and what we should do, to connect political, ethical, and social systems within a broad, unified field.

Dartmouth University philosophers advise: If you want to learn about the human body, take biology. If you want to know about the mind, take psychology. If you want to know how the body and mind relate, take philosophy.

Thomas Jefferson had a philosophy degree. So did martial-arts specialist Bruce Lee, Supreme Court Justice David Souter, activist Angela Davis, and NBA coach Phil Jackson.

Proponents say it teaches analytical skills that enable students to succeed in everything from running businesses to practicing law to operating nonprofit agencies.

"In their other courses they're being told what to think," said John Carvalho, chairman of the Villanova University philosophy department. "In philosophy, we tell them, 'You haven't begun to think until you don't know what to think.'"

That is, to recognize that some problems have multiple solutions - or no solution. To think critically, write clearly, and argue cogently.

In seven years as department chairman, Carvalho said, he's seen a small increase in the number of students, to about 75 majors and 25 graduates a year - but a big increase in the quality of those students.

Top performers have grade-point averages in excess of 3.9. These days, if a student arrives with a GPA of less than 3.3, he counsels him or her about whether philosophy is a good choice.

Brian Karalunas, a three-time all-American in lacrosse, graduated from Villanova with a philosophy degree in the spring - and in September was drafted by the Minnesota Swarm of the National Lacrosse League.

He thinks his major has helped his playing. The ability to make logical decisions, to explore several possibilities for the best option, comes directly from philosophy, he said.

"It helps you to think slowly in fast situations," said Karalunas, 22, expected to debut as a pro in January.

He never planned to major in philosophy, but found that early courses "cultivated critical thinking and spurred imagination. Those life skills, I thought, were the most valuable I could get."

There's not much question that philosophy students are smart.

From 2001 to 2004, philosophy majors had the highest average score on the verbal reasoning and analytical writing sections of the GRE, the standardized test for graduate school.

And being a "philosopher," however the work might be defined, is among the best jobs in the country, according to Careercast.com, an employment website. The company ranked 200 jobs based on income, environment, stress, physical demands, and employment outlook.

The top job was software engineer. The position of philosopher ranked 16th, ahead of astronomer, aerospace engineer, and pharmacist, and well ahead of the worst jobs, which included newspaper reporter and nuclear plant decontamination technician.

In strict terms of salary, however, philosophy majors don't fare so well, according to PayScale Inc., a Seattle firm that tracks compensation. In the company's 2011-12
ranking of top undergraduate degrees, philosophy stood 48th, with a median midcareer salary of $75,600.

That was far behind a host of engineering, math, and chemistry degrees.

Philosophy has long been derided as a degree for drifters, a major that offers no clear career path. Search "philosophy" and "useless" on Google and you get nearly 10 million hits. Over the summer, USA Today ran a column on academic advising headlined, "A philosophy major . . . who now works full time at Sears."

Suffice it to say, though, that not everybody is selling snowblowers in the lawn and garden department.

Steven Occhiolini is an accountant in the Blue Bell office of LarsonAllen L.L.P., a national accounting firm.

He always wanted to be an accountant, but became captivated by philosophy as a freshman at La Salle University. He graduated in 2008 with a double major.

At LarsonAllen, he's found that philosophy helps him produce more descriptive, better-written reports.

"It really makes your brain work in a different way," Occhiolini said.

Others say the same.

Maloney, the Lehigh student, originally intended to take philosophy as a minor, having enjoyed a couple of early classes. But halfway through her senior year, "it seemed like all arrows were pointing toward a philosophy major being a really good idea. It kind of fills the hole in my education."

She decided that paying for a fifth year of college - and forgoing a year's salary - was worth it. She plans to look for jobs in technical fields in the spring, confident that she'll be better able to understand and explain complicated problems.

"I'll be going in with a set of skills that are uncommon in engineers," she said. "Most engineers struggle to explain simply - they get bogged down in the details. Philosophy teaches you to take a step back, understand what your audience needs to know, and explain it to them so that they don't get lost in the scientific challenges."