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## For philosophy majors, the question after graduation is: What next?

By [T. Rees Shapiro](#) June 20, 2017

Philosophy majors spend their college years pondering deep questions, such as: What is the meaning of life? Do we have free will? And what job am I going to get with this degree after graduation?

It turns out the last question isn't hard to answer: Just about anything.

The idea that philosophy majors aren't prepared for professional careers "is a little bit of a myth, to be honest," said Thomas Holden, chair of the philosophy department at the University of California at Santa Barbara. "Philosophy is not about sages sitting on mountaintops speculating about the cosmos."

Graduates in philosophy inhabit Wall Street corner offices, roam the oak-paneled halls of the Supreme Court and reign over boardrooms in Silicon Valley.

Interest in the major has risen steadily in the past three decades. Although totals have dipped slightly in recent years, federal education data shows the **number of students who received bachelor's degrees in philosophy has doubled since 1987**, peaking at 7,926 graduates in 2013.



Carly Fiorina, shown in April 2016, majored in philosophy before she became chief executive of Hewlett-Packard. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

Anna-Bella Sicilia, 22, a senior in philosophy at the University of Maryland, said she believes a philosophy degree will help her job prospects.

“I think people are impressed by a philosophy degree,” Sicilia said. “The skills I’ve learned are very transferrable. I don’t feel like I’ve studied philosophy and ‘now what?’ I don’t feel ‘stuck’ with it.”

Christopher Morris, chair of the U-Md. philosophy department, said the critical thinking, precise analysis and cogent writing required for a degree are rigorous training for any professional career.

“Most people don’t have much of an idea of what philosophy is,” Morris said. “People imagine us sort of sitting there casually yakking away with a glass of wine.”

Some [surveys](#) show that philosophy majors perform better on average than most of their peers on exams for law, medicine and other graduate schools. And research by the salary data site PayScale showed that philosophy majors rank in the top 100 of all academic fields for average mid-career salary, at \$84,100. Philosophy majors, ranked 95th, bested graduates who studied business administration, political science, pre-medicine, biology, psychology and journalism. The data probably reflects the earning power of many philosophy majors who later obtain advanced graduate or professional degrees. Still, those who study areas such as ethics, aesthetics and epistemology are used to the misconception that their diplomas lack much value. If liberal-arts degrees are the target of jokes, philosophy majors are frequently the punchline.

Take Conan O’Brien giving the 2011 Dartmouth College commencement address:



Sheila Bair, shown in 2013, leaned on her philosophy degree to make decisions as Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. chair during the financial crisis. (Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg News)

“Of course, there are many parents here, and I have real advice for them as well. Parents, you should write this down,” O’Brien said. “If your child majored in fine arts or philosophy, you have good reason to be worried. The only place where they are now really qualified to get a job is ancient Greece. Good luck with that degree.”

Numerous examples tell another story.

Supreme Court Justice Stephen G. Breyer majored in philosophy at Stanford University. So did Carly Fiorina before she became chief executive of Hewlett-Packard. As chair of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp., Sheila Bair leaned on her philosophy degree from the University of Kansas to make crucial decisions during the financial crisis. NBC journalist Katy Tur said her background in philosophy helped her formulate probing questions of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump during the 2016 campaign.

“Philosophy majors get a bad rap,” Tur said. “People like to assume we are bloviators. . . . I would argue that for the vast majority of people, an education of teaching you to think critically about the world you are in and what you know and what you don’t know is useful for absolutely everything that you could possibly do in the future.”

Tur said that her philosophy degree from UC-Santa Barbara proved vital on the campaign trail. She said one of the first questions she explored as an undergraduate concerned the nature of reality.

“I love philosophy because I love trying to find a way to answer life’s biggest questions,” Tur said. “Are we not just brains in a vat? I think that’s a fascinating concept.”

Tur said she became enthralled by French thinker René Descartes and his explorations of existence: “The first question is, what can we trust and what can we prove?” Tur said.

As a journalist, Tur said, her daily pursuit is the truth.

“There is a giant debate about what is fake news and what is real news and what can we trust,” Tur said. “It’s super scary right now that we are in a time where people don’t trust what is in front of their eyes and that they only trust what they want to be in front of their eyes.”

Fiorina said that at Stanford she was interested in the roots of human understanding of knowledge, opting to read Plato and Aristotle in the original Greek.

“You learn that the questions that we each struggle with, mankind has struggled with for eternity,” Fiorina said.

Yet even today she sees the bad reputation philosophy majors must overcome.

“Every time I tell people, they laugh,” Fiorina said, noting that it was considered a dead-end degree. “It meant I was unemployable.”

Yet she credits her undergraduate studies for developing critical thinking essential in the business world.

“I learned how to separate the wheat from the chaff, essential from just interesting, and I think that’s a particularly critical skill now when there is a ton of interesting but ultimately irrelevant information floating around,” Fiorina said.

As FDIC chair from 2006 to 2011, Bair was responsible for ensuring that bank customers did not lose their money as financial institutions teetered. She said her studies in philosophy helped her to distill what was most important amid all the “clamoring and agendas swirling around.”

“It helps you break things down to their simplest elements,” Bair said. “My philosophy training really helps me with that intellectual rigor of simplifying things and finding out what’s important.”

For Larry Sanger, studying philosophy offered a window into how people think about knowledge — and also how it is shared. After earning a bachelor’s degree in the subject from Reed College and a doctorate in philosophy from Ohio State University, he was hired by Internet entrepreneur Jimmy Wales to work on a new project — a Web-based encyclopedia — that became Wikipedia.

Sanger said his background helped him distill the outline of “what a collaborative encyclopedia would be like.”

Gavri Schreiber, 22, who graduated from U-Md. in May, said his family was skeptical at first when he told them he planned to major in philosophy.

“The first thing they said was, ‘What are you going to do with it?’ ” Schreiber said. “I said: ‘I’ll pick up a Chinese minor so I’ll have a marketable skill. Don’t worry about it.’ ”

In the end, Schreiber said he realized that his philosophy degree would be an asset.

“I don’t think that employers and the job market realizes and values a background in philosophy as much as they should,” he said.

Ultimately it worked out for Schreiber. By the time he graduated, he knew where he was headed. After completing a Fulbright program in Taiwan, he said, he will enroll in Harvard Law School.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/for-philosophy-majors-the-question-after-graduation-is-what-next/2017/06/20/aa7fae2a-46fo-11e7-98cd-af64b4fe2dfc\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.95cf617f5b74](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/for-philosophy-majors-the-question-after-graduation-is-what-next/2017/06/20/aa7fae2a-46fo-11e7-98cd-af64b4fe2dfc_story.html?utm_term=.95cf617f5b74)