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The Best Argument for Studying English? The Employment Numbers

Only people who don't understand statistics would question the value of an English degree.

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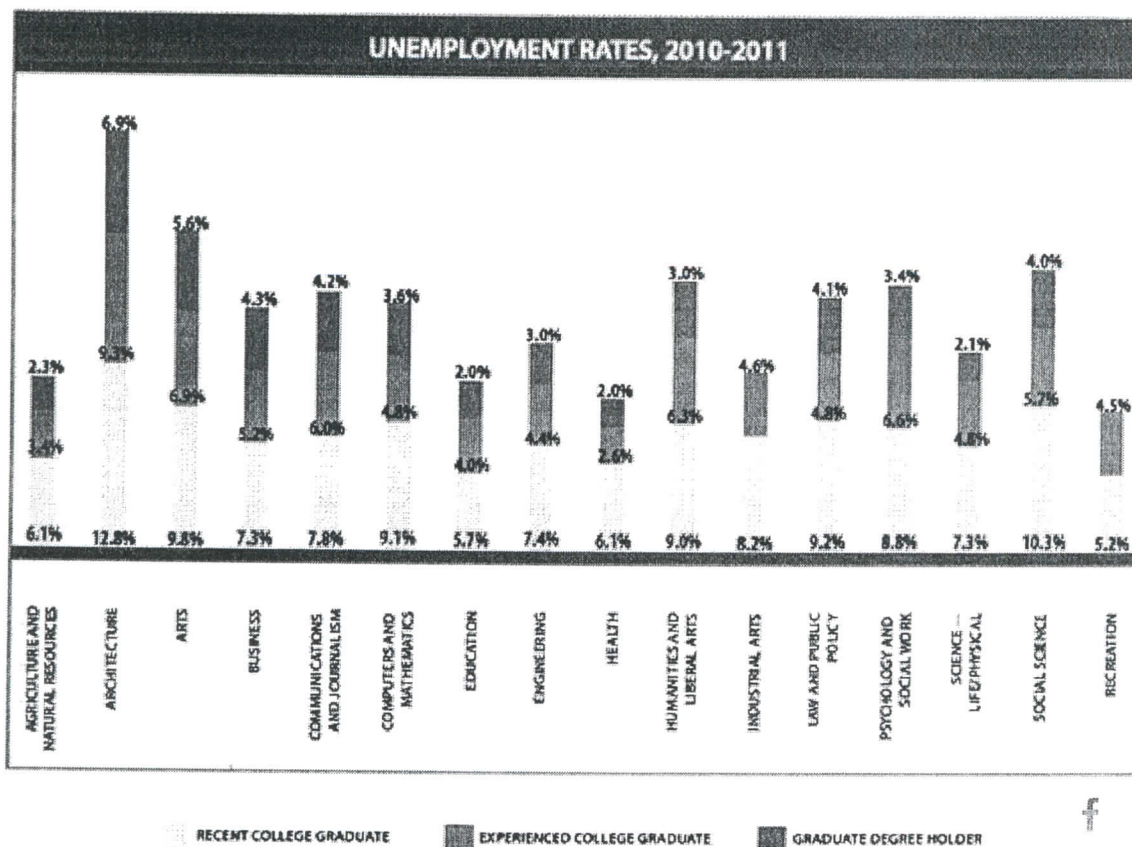
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Undergraduate humanities may not be in quite the sorry shape that pundits like David Brooks seem to believe. But it's true that at certain institutions, enrollments have dipped lately. At Yale, for instance, English and History have lost ground over the past ten years to economics and political science.

Well of course! you might say. The economy's eating twenty-two-year-olds for lunch, and undergrads want jobs. But here's the funny part: humanities students aren't actually faring that terribly on the market.

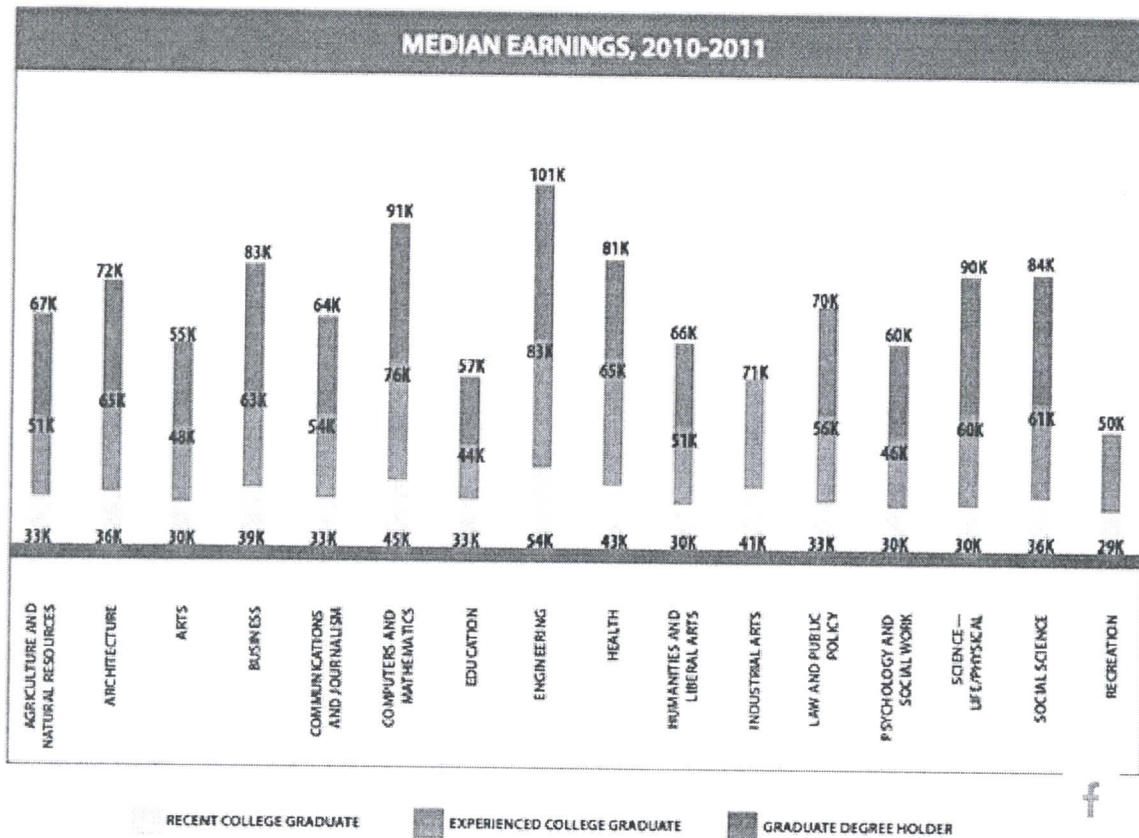
That's according to the most recent survey of the college graduate labor market by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. As of 2010-2011, the most recent year with available data, recent humanities and liberal arts majors had 9 percent unemployment. That's right about on par with students in computer and math fields (9.1 percent), psychology and social work (8.8 percent), and the social sciences (10.3 percent). And it's just a bit above the average across all majors of 7.9 percent.



Zoom in a little closer, and the pattern still holds. Immediately after school, English and History majors experienced 9.8 percent and 9.5 percent unemployment, respectively. For economics and political science, meanwhile, the figures are 10.4 percent and 11.1 percent. Score one for the lit nerds. Meanwhile, in computer science, which is regularly talked about as if it's the single most practical major a young person can choose these days, graduates are still staring at 8.7 percent joblessness. (Worth emphasizing, here: none of these figures are particularly *good*.)

The truly pre-professional fields -- including health, business, and education -- do have noticeably lower unemployment rates, as do hard sciences and engineering. But most students aren't realistically debating between pre-med, engineering, or comparative lit. And the kinda-sorta-career-focused majors in the social sciences that might attract a more humanities-oriented student don't always give graduates much of a leg up.

Now here's where the social sciences majors do tend to excel: salary. Especially among experienced grads, economics and poli sci majors do out-earn their classmates who spent four years thinking about lyric poetry. But there's also some self-selection going on there. Not that many English majors are gunning to become Wall Street analysts, after all.



Bottom line: If humanities departments really want to win students back from the clutches of political science and econ, they'd be smart to start by showing them the employment stats.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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