Entering the job market with a Humanities or Arts degree

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Agenda

• What I did with my Humanities degree (3)
• Hiring managers (5)
• How to describe your skills (2 + template)
• Coda 1: talking to family (1)
• Coda 2: interesting workplaces (1)
My career path so far

- Native of Ithaca, NY, Cornell faculty brat
- Undergrad English major, graduate school in English
- University of Michigan asst. prof. C17 and C18 English lit, classical and Biblical influences on literature
- Bartender
- Amazon.com: many roles over 13 years
- Mindbloom: VP operations at a small start-up
- Synapse: VP operations at a medium-sized product design engineering firm
- Board of directors, Lambda Legal (nonprofit) [current]
- Consultant, speaker, author [current]
How I made the big changes

• Faculty member => bartender
  – Denied tenure. @#$%! Needed a job!
  – Moved from Ann Arbor to Seattle
  – Got a bartender’s license

• Bartender => Amazon
  – Chatted with fellow former member of grad student softball team, an early adopter of the internet, who told me about Amazon (1996)
  – Interviewed with them and discussed my skills (not much about my previous jobs)
  – Got new skills on the job and used them to take on new roles

• => Board of Directors, Lambda Legal
  – Involved as a donor
  – Hated their web properties and complained about them
  – Consulted with them about improving their web properties
  – Invited to join Board of Directors
Lessons from those changes

• You can train for a particular job and get it, and still need to make big professional changes
• Transitional jobs are fine while you look for another job
• Some jobs require particular qualifications, such as an MD or an engineer’s license, but most do not
• All jobs require skills
• Organizations require many different types of skills
• You can learn a lot on the job
• Your interests can become your job, or part of your job
• Things not invented yet will drive new jobs over time
Hiring managers

• I have never hired a degree of any kind, ever
• I have hired people who can help me solve problems
  – people with evidence of showing up, working hard, and being persistent
  – people with skills, which may or may not be gained via a major
  – people who can show me how what they can do is relevant to what I need
  – people who are willing and able to take on new things
• Once you start working, your work history is *immediately* more relevant than your major for every future job
What I expect from everyone I hire

• Honesty
• Reliability
• Best efforts in the workplace
• Good treatment of all co-workers
• Excellent treatment of all customers
• Willingness to learn more about their jobs
• Willingness to learn more about the business
What I expect from college grads

• Experience with a lot of different people (studying, working, living)
• Tolerance of human differences
• Ability to work independently
• More advanced intellectual and process problem-solving skills than those without university training usually have

*College provides you with concentrated experience of difference: people and knowledge*
& from Humanities or Arts degree holders

• The ability to write well: to describe, analyze, narrate, and persuade
• The ability to place problems in their historical, social, and economic contexts
• A tolerance for complexity

*Humanities and Arts degrees provide you with context and tools to understand the products of human minds: societies, economic structures, and arts*
Why you major in a subject

- Advanced work teaches you how to recognize when you don’t know enough
- Advanced work teaches you how to learn more about a subject

A major enables you to heed Jon Stewart: “When you smell something, say something”
Your skills in the workplace

• College values achievement as represented by papers, exams, projects, and grades

• Workplaces value achievement as represented by customers, products, services, budgets, projects, and schedules

• You must describe your skills in terms that make sense to workplace hiring managers
How to describe your skills

• Evaluate all your college and work experiences
  – Every educational effort, particularly group efforts
  – Every paid and volunteer job
  – Every role at a club or interest group or living space
• Describe what you were responsible for
• Describe what resulted from what you were responsible for
• Link the results of your skills to your employer’s stated need
How to describe your skills

• template exercise showing you how to describe your skills
Talking to family

- Assume (their) good intentions
- Demonstrate (your) good intentions
- If they have concerns, understand them, even if you don’t agree. Ask “what worries you about my major?” and listen to the answer
- Ask them about their own career pathway
- Thank them
- Identify successful people with humanities backgrounds, and point them out
Interesting workplaces

- www.incredible-edible-todomorden.co.uk
- www.heifer.org
- www.payscale.com
- www.bridgingthegapafrika.org
- www.fingerlakeswinecountry.com
- www.createspace.com
- www.goodreads.com
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