

What Are You Going to Do with That? Thinking About Careers with a Philosophy BA

The majority of students who graduate from College with a BA in Philosophy do not end up going on to graduate school in Philosophy or becoming Professors of Philosophy. Those who do not typically either:

- Pursue work directly after College
- Pursue graduate work or advanced training in some other area such as law or social-work.

There are two important facts about preparing for and seeking work with a Philosophy Major.

- *First*, the name of the major ('philosophy') does not (typically) correspond directly to the names of jobs you will be applying for. There is no "philosophy factory" making "knowledge widgets" out there—at least nothing called by this name.
- *Second*, the knowledge and skills that you have developed as a Philosophy Major are (i) highly versatile and transferrable and (ii) things actually sought by employers in a wide variety of professions in both the for-profit and non-profit sector.

The Central Implications of this are that, as a Philosophy Major, you need to

- (i) give more thought and reflection to the question of what kind of work and career you want to pursue than do others,
- (ii) be able to explicitly write (in your resume and cover letters) and talk to prospective employers about the skills and abilities that your studies have given you, and about how these are relevant to work you are applying for, and
- (iii) consider pursuing additional training or opportunities that will assist you in "being more marketable" or pursuing a career in the area that is of most interest to you.

1. While Still an Undergraduate

First: study, learn, and grow. Take full advantage of this opportunity to learn all that you can and to develop yourself as a thinker and as a human being, *then*,

- Think from time to time about what kind of career or work might be interesting to you in the future. Attend GVSU's career fairs, talk with employers about the kinds of work that are out there and the skills and knowledge they are looking for.
- Consider adding minors or double majoring in areas relevant to potential future work, including studying a foreign language.
- Consider seriously all of the following opportunities for growth, learning, and diversification: study abroad, take your BA cognate seriously and really learn a second language, certificate programs offered at GVSU, relevant extracurricular programming, regular participation in University events such as guest lectures, colloquia, or workshops; internships through the Career Center or independently pursued.
- Try to be reflective and intentional, so far as you are able, about your own education and developing knowledge and abilities.
- Consider also whether you are interested in pursuing some type of advanced degree or training post-graduation; if so, then you should be preparing for this (and probably applying) yet during your undergraduate years.

2. Post-Graduation

Exactly what to do here will be different for different people.

- If you already know that you want to pursue graduate or other advanced studies, then hopefully you have already begun the process of applying for these and are on your way.
- If you have a specific career-path or line of work that you want to pursue, then hopefully you have done some things to help prepare you for it during your undergraduate studies; in any case, you will need to craft a clear and articulate resume and narrative that helps communicate your qualifications for such work.
- If you are not sure what your long-term plans are, then you'll still be applying for work. Cast a wide net; don't auto-exclude yourself from a position that sounds interesting. Do a little research on positions you apply for and do your best to tailor your resume and cover letter so as to make a case that your background and abilities are a good fit.

What kinds of skills do you have? Well,

- ability to think critically and systematically
- ability to see the big picture and think systematically about non-standard possibilities (the old "outside the box" thinking)
- ability to organize and manage (conceptually) large amounts of or complex information
- ability to manage ambiguous situations and make principled decisions
- ability to think about ethical and social dimensions of situations
- ability to organize and carry out work independently, including research and reports
- ability to understand and interact with diverse perspectives, both intellectual and cultural
- ability to take in and process information and learn new things on the job

...and I don't think that this even completes the list. Do not underestimate how rare or how valuable the skills are. Think about them, reflect on where you personally line up with regard to the above skills, and practice explaining them to people, especially prospective employers (that is, rehearse how you would explain to a prospective employer in a job-interview which skills and knowledge your study of philosophy has given you and how these might be valuable).

In the cover-letters that you send and in interviews, you need to be able to both (i) explain that you have these abilities in a way that is accessible to your interviewer, and (ii) connect these abilities in meaningful ways to the potential duties and responsibilities of the job you are applying for. This may well mean that you need to (iii) do a little research about the company or organization ahead of the interview so that you can (iv) ask meaningful questions about the position in order to create the opportunity to be able to explain more clearly how your skills fit with their true needs. It is not a bad idea to attend GVSU's Career Fair each time it is offered. Early on, you can use the event to gather information and practice making a pitch about your own abilities. Later on, of course, you may well be looking for a prospective employer.