Career planning key for liberal arts grads

By Susan Spencer TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

“What do I do with a B.A. in English?” laments Broadway-musical character Princeton, a newly minted college graduate with no gainful employment or direction, in an opening song in “Avenue Q.”

For many college students, the connection between their choice of major and career prospects is fraught with tension, particularly in the long-lasting economic downturn. High unemployment rates combined with college costs surpassing $50,000 a year at many private institutions have made career planning an important factor in higher education, especially if students have taken out loans.

A study recently released by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce found that while graduates with bachelor's degrees have less than half the unemployment rate of those with only a high school diploma, unemployment and earnings for recent graduates vary starkly by college major.

For example, this hasn't been the best time for architecture majors, who, based on national 2009-10 surveys, faced a 13.9 percent unemployment rate; while health and education majors were doing relative well with 5.4 percent unemployment. Humanities and liberal arts majors faced a shaky 9.4 percent unemployment rate.

The study found that majors tied closely to a professional field tended to have rosier employment prospects, but like architecture's connection to the construction industry, could suffer when the industry founders.

Michael J. Kennedy, a senior at the College of the Holy Cross from Montville Township, N.J., isn't worried about graduating with a history degree and starting up the career ladder. He's already lined up a position for after graduation as an analyst at investment firm Morgan Stanley Smith Barney in Purchase, N.Y.

The job offer followed an internship at the firm last summer.

Mr. Kennedy said the first question interviewers asked him was how being a history major would help him.

“As a history major, I do bring a different perspective to the table,” he said. “The more perspectives you can offer is good for a work environment.”

Although Mr. Kennedy entered college intending to major in accounting, he switched to history during sophomore year because he was deeply interested in the subject. He said, “I always thought it could provide a broad-based foundation for a lot of fields.”

He added that his liberal arts background has given him valuable skills in speaking and writing effectively, in research and in being able to synthesize information well.

Mr. Kennedy also engaged in what career and education professionals say are critical skill-building activities: He's been a leader in Holy Cross' pre-business organization, he participated in the school's four-day Finance Boot Camp, he had an internship and he networked with alumni at an event this winter in New York City.

“The beauty of being at a liberal arts institution like Holy Cross is your major doesn't matter,” said Amy C. Murphy, director of the college's Career Planning Center. “Employers want to see you do your best academic work, leadership in what you're involved in and internships for the contextual work piece. Those are the three legs of the stool that makes up their career portfolio.”

Ms. Murphy said the Career Planning Center helps students identify their interests and develop networking skills; to find out more about careers and job opportunities.

Ultimately, she said, employers are looking to hire people who demonstrate teamwork, strong writing ability, analytical skills and leadership and who can adapt to changing circumstances. The choice of a major doesn't matter as much as how well a student does in that major, which is usually better when the student pursues a field he sincerely likes.

David P. McDonough, director of career services at Clark University, said, “A fair amount of that anxiety (about employment) has come into play in the last few years, especially if students have seen their parents laid off.”

But he said that in the college's follow-up surveys, it's rare that a recent graduate seeking employment is still looking for a job six months out.

“The difference between majors is not that great,” he said. “It's 'What else have you done? ’” He agreed that internships and leadership experience were vital.

Mr. McDonough said the longer-term benefits of a liberal arts degree, including critical thinking, analytic and communication skills, help students succeed in fields not necessarily related to their major.

Parents, who usually foot most of the bill for college, are often the most anxious about the connections between their child's educational choices and careers. To reassure them as well as prospective students, colleges have become adept at pointing out their graduates' successes as part of the admissions process.

Beverly Sullivan of Westboro, whose daughter Keely was admitted to Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications for next fall, isn't too concerned about Keely's anticipated career path in broadcast journalism.

“ Their alumni are amazing,” Ms. Sullivan said. “They're committed to opening the door for you in very competitive industries.”

Learning about careers and how people get a foothold in their work needs to start even before college, according to Susan G. Gately, executive director of the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce Education Foundation.

Ms. Gately said high school students hear the message that careers in health care, science, technology, engineering and math are where the jobs are, but they don't know how to articulate their own interests and see how their love of writing or art, for example, could be applied in such a field.

“I think we miss that connection all the time,” she said. “We miss the talent and passion that people bring to their work. That's why we have 70 percent of college starters not
And for those who really want to spend four years studying English or history or philosophy, but are worried about their employment future: Take heart. Neil McDonough, president and CEO of FLEXcon, a technology-based manufacturing firm, majored in philosophy before he pursued a master's in business administration. He wrote in an email, "My background in philosophy, plus an MBA, encourages me to be a well-rounded critical thinker and take a more thoughtful approach to my everyday decisions, along with those that relate to high technology."