

Humanities in the Rearview Mirror

by Hal Jacobs

If recent surveys, statistics and articles dealing with the “crisis in the humanities” tell us anything, it’s that many high school seniors, first-year students and their parents aren’t sure about the value of a humanities major. While a professional school experience seems like a sure bet in today’s competitive business world, many think of a philosophy or history degree as impractical and irrelevant.

But when we contacted some Emory alumni in the humanities and asked them about the value of their undergraduate experience, they told a different story.

In fact, a common thread emerges.

They say that as high school seniors or college freshman they were too young and inexperienced to decide on a pre-professional track. **Instead of** training them for a specific job, their critical thinking in the humanities led to a greater awareness of themselves, the world and their place in it—as well as a job they feel passionate about.

Here are a few of their stories.

the carter center program coordinator in the sudan

SStephen Becknell '00C-'02MPH talks from his small office in Lokichoggio, a border town in Kenya next to the eastern border of Sudan that serves as the base of operations for a number of relief organizations. As the resident technical adviser for the Carter Center's health programs in Southern Sudan, he oversees efforts against three nasty infectious diseases: Guinea worm disease, trachoma and river blindness.

Asked to describe what his days are like, he carefully searches for the right word, then says, "Frenetic."

"We're sort of all over the place right now trying to develop suboffices throughout Southern Sudan so that we can find and fight these diseases. And we're trying to forge relationships with a new government and representatives from the ministry of health while staying neutral in the sensitivities between the northern government and the southern government. There's never a dull moment."

As an Emory freshman, Becknell took a philosophy class with Thomas Flynn, Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Philosophy (see sidebar), and was captivated by Flynn's "sense of humanity and his approach to engaging students, encouraging them to think and write more critically."

At the time, his parents, Jerry and Eileen Becknell, had no idea what their son might study, or where philosophy would lead in the working world. They were the first members of their families to go to college; she studied to become a nurse and he pursued a military career. Still they encouraged him, believing that the experience, in their words, "would expose Steven to a variety of ideas, sharpen his thinking, and improve his oral communication and writing—skills needed in any career."

In his junior year Becknell thought about becoming an outdoor instructor either for Outward Bound or the National Outdoor Leadership School. Some of his favorite experiences had involved trips into the wilderness and rock climbing with Outdoor Emory.

Then during the last semester of his senior year, he went to Africa for the first time and

interned with CARE International on a child survival project in Kenya. The opportunity to combine his interest in ethics and community service with the joy of being outside confirmed his decision to go into international public health.

"I enjoy the interaction of working with a team of people dedicated to something important," he says. "That was what I was exposed to during the internship with CARE. And that was the kind of dynamic I wanted to be part of."



After graduating from the College, he entered Emory's masters of public health program, then took jobs at the Carter Center. He traveled the back roads of Ghana for two and a half years as part of the Global 2000 Guinea Worm Eradication Program before beginning his work in the Sudan last fall.

Every day he finds parallels with his philosophy background.

"One thing that those studies gave me was an ability to develop a critical eye for situations and an interest in both ethics and logic, which ties directly into epidemiology," says Becknell. "More importantly, the humanities background reinforced my strong interest in community service and international community and relationship building."

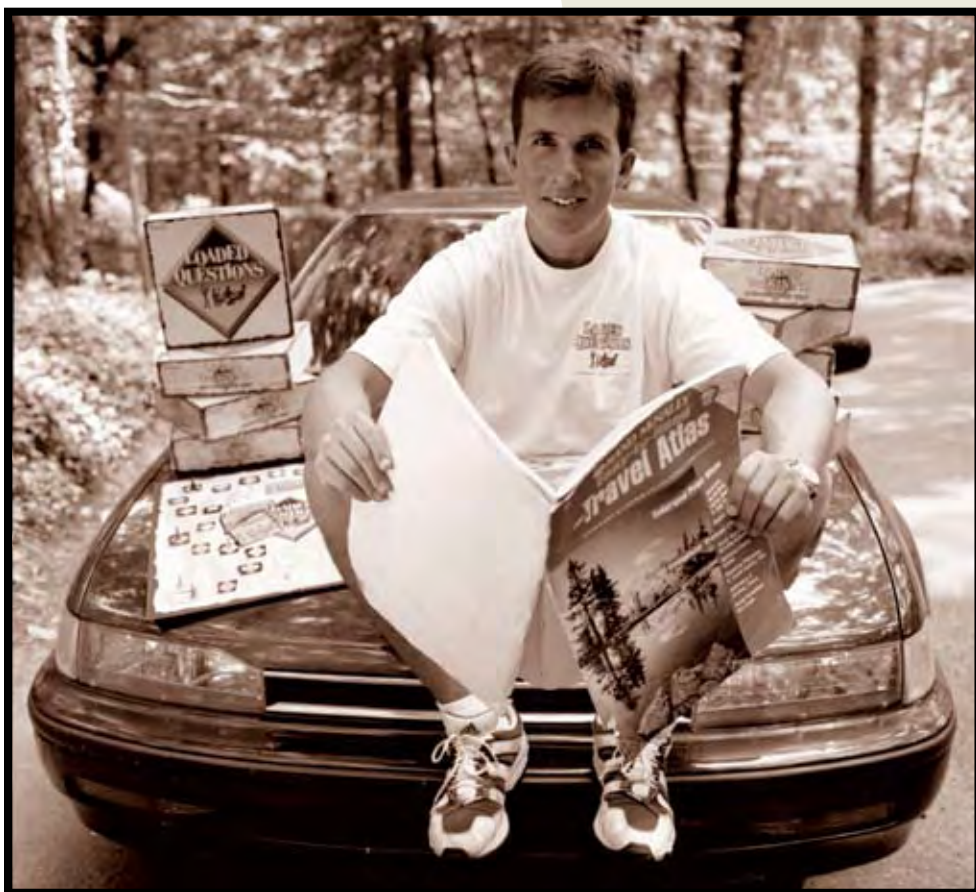
"I don't think I'd be where I am now if I had been a business major at Emory."

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Philosophy Professor Thomas Flynn and Stephen Becknell.

the board game inventor

In a March 2006 Associated Press story about the booming industry of business schools, **Eric Poses '95C** is practically the poster boy for successful entrepreneurs who have bypassed the traditional B-school route.



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But not all entrepreneurs feel the need for a degree. Eric Poses, who majored in history at Emory University, developed the popular board game “Loaded Questions” nine years ago and sold it out of the trunk of his car. Now he’s the sole employee of All Things Equal Inc., his company based in Santa Monica, Calif., that earned \$1.8 million last year.

When he entered Emory in 1991, Poses planned to go to law school and follow in

the footsteps of his father and brother, who own a law firm in Miami. But in his senior year he lived next to three first-year law students and discovered two things about himself: one, he would never be as competitive as they were; two, he just couldn’t be in a classroom any more.

After interning briefly at the Carter Center, he moved back to Miami where he tried his hand at being a copy editor. Several months later, still searching for a more fulfilling career, he came up with the idea for his first board game.

“Everybody’s got something to say,” says Poses. “People like to talk about themselves. And it’s fun to learn about people and their experiences. ‘Loaded Questions’ certainly enables that.”

Emory was “a great experience,” Poses says, adding that he loved living in Atlanta, made lasting friends and had interesting professors. “You could definitely point a straight line from my experiences there to coming up with questions and thinking about the world, being interested in different people and their opinions.”

You can hear the excitement in his voice as he describes his latest game (his ninth), a board game based around the entire New Yorker cartoon library in which players guess captions.

“I never thought I’d be a salesman. Never thought I’d be working with customers and dealing with inventory and managing a business. It’s so much common sense and instinct, you really don’t need a business degree to go out there and start your own business. But you do need an idea.”

He believes his first game was based on the best idea he’s had so far.

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above: Eric Poses combines work and play in his career as game board inventor. far right: Alexander Budnitzat work with his graphic design group.

A the graphic designer

Alexander Budnitz '99C thought about going to art school while he was still in high school.

"But many of the people I knew who were planning on going to art school seemed to be making their choice based on their fear of writing and reading as much as for their love of art," he says. "That, and they thought it would be a hell of a party."

Once at Emory he thought about focusing on economics, but quickly discovered that calculus and contemporary economics were not his forte. Then he took an Introduction to Ethics class taught by Pamela Hall, associate professor of philosophy and women's studies.

"And that was it," he says. "I was a philosophy major."

His choice brought a continual round of the question that haunts humanities majors everywhere: "What are you going to do with that?"

Budnitz, however, was interested in other questions.

"For much of my time at Emory I didn't know exactly what I intended to do with my humanities degree," he says. "I knew I was enjoying myself immensely: I was reading and discussing and thinking about topics and problems I had thought were well beyond me in high school—and doing so in a reasonably intelligent way. What I and everyone else in the humanities was doing seemed meaningful and important. How exactly I was going to translate that into a respectable job with a good paycheck I didn't know."

Seven years later, he knows. As a graphic designer in Boston, he must learn new software applications every year and keep up with new theories and aesthetic trends.

"There's a real utilitarian value to what I learned as a student of the humanities, as well as a more ephemeral way in which my time as a humanities major continues to add value to my life," he says. "On a day to day basis, my grasp of language is far

better than it would have been had I received a purely technical or narrowly focused education. The time spent learning to reason clearly and express that reasoning in written words is now a key asset in my professional life. I'm often called upon to craft letters to clients and develop proposals. I know that I'd not be able to think on my feet and argue as eloquently or clearly for an idea or aesthetic approach were it not for my philosophy training.

"As for that more ephemeral value, I think that relates more to the substance of what the humanities is all about. It promotes a critical but open-minded curiosity that has helped me cope, to stay interested and engaged."

His father, Albee Budnitz, a physician in Nashua, New Hampshire, says he was never too concerned about Alex's major area of study.

"A broad-based college level education at an excellent school such as Emory is what all people should have, if fortunate enough, to enable independent informed thinking, confidence in taking initiatives, creativity, and an interest in lifelong learning," he says. "These attributes enable not only success in life-supporting endeavors, but also joy and appreciation in these efforts for themselves and in life itself, no matter what circumstances deal out."

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the professional sports photographer

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When art history major **Jamie Squire '95C** enrolled at Emory, he thought he wanted to be an engineer and do a 3-2 program with Emory and Georgia Tech. Then he ran into freshman physics.

“I got a ‘D’ and that pretty much squashed that,” he says during a telephone conversation recently from his home in Maryland outside of Washington, D.C.

Because of his artistic leanings, especially his interest in photography, he enrolled in some art history classes. He also began shooting photos for the *Emory Wheel*, gaining access to major concerts, sporting and political events, which helped him to develop an impressive portfolio while still in college.

These days Squire travels to premier sporting events as a professional sports photographer with Getty Images, the world’s largest photo agency. The Super Bowl, the World Series, the Final Four, the Kentucky Derby, the Masters—you name it, he’s done it.

But one thing he didn’t do is study at a well-known photography school. He describes how prospective employers would look over his resume and see Emory.

“‘Does Emory have a photography program?’ they’d always ask. I’d say, ‘No, I had to do it all on my own.’ A few eyebrows would be raised that I ended up a professional photographer without going to a photo school.”

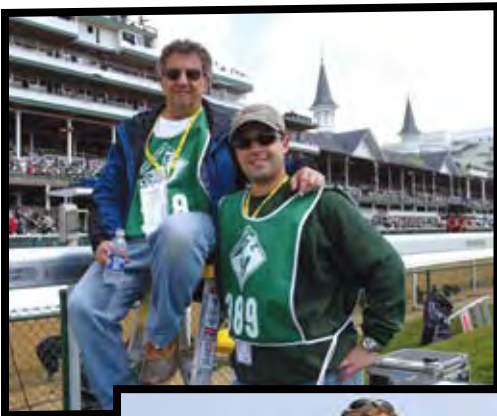
He got his foot in the door by virtue of hard work. And it didn’t hurt that he was practicing his craft in Atlanta in the years leading up to the 1996 Olympics. As a result, he became the local guy who could cover pre-Olympic events for top magazines.

Looking back, he feels that his humanities background gave him certain advantages that allowed him to flourish in his profession, advantages he might not have gotten had he just studied photography.

“In art history you have to write papers and make arguments and support them. I really learned how to write and communicate. Because I didn’t quite know what I wanted to do during my first two years as an undergrad, the humanities background allowed me to explore different things. For example, I took a course in computer science—and things that I learned in that class are still helpful background with digital photography.”

His father, John Squire, a CPA in Rockville, Maryland, is also pleased about his son’s undergraduate experience. “In fact, I’m glad there was no photography major at Emory. That might have narrowed his perspective,” he says.

“What I saw in Jamie over the course of his tenure at Emory was intellectual growth and personal maturity,” he continues. “He needed that to put himself in a position to focus (no pun intended) on his career goals. College is a transition from childhood to adulthood, and I believe many young people just don’t have enough perspective to intelligently select a career specialty at that time.”



top left: Jamie Squire on assignment at the 2003 Kentucky Derby with his father, John. bottom left: Jamie at the 2002 Belmont Stakes. above right: Meriwether Tull in the midst of production for *Homo Erectus*, a caveman comedy film directed by Adam Rifkin.

the hollywood production assistant

The best time for **Meriwether Tull '05C** to talk on the phone is during her one-hour morning commute to work in Los Angeles. The drive allows her a chance to decompress and plan her day, which includes things like dropping off the hard drive of a Quicktime movie that was shot entirely through surveillance cam, stopping by the production company office in Beverly Hills to make phone calls to authors about screenplay ideas, meeting with a visual effects coordinator, reading through piles of scripts and moving into a new studio space.

Instead of going to film school to break into the industry like many others, Tull majored in English at Emory. As a freshman, she set her sights on being a lifelong student and earning a PhD. Then along came English professor Richard Rambuss, who integrated film into his classes in a new and exciting way. And she loved working with other students on short films that they entered in the Campus Moviefest (a popular student film competition begun by Emory students in 2001, now spreading to campuses nationwide). By the time she wrote her senior year thesis, she had realized something important about herself.

"I love reading and being in the library, but it's hard for me not to be out in the world, moving things around," says Tull.

So she decided to "ship out to L.A."

"Reading quickly was the big kicker for me getting started," Tull says. "A lot of script development is just picking out aspects of stories that could be better, how they're bad, how they can (or can't) be changed. My English major was pivotal in that."

In no time at all, she was sculpting a pit of dead cattle out of styrofoam for a teen slasher movie in Texas. A month later she was an assistant to director Adam Rifkin and working on a movie about cavemen in which she "donned many a loincloth in the name of comedy."

Her mother, Christie Tull, an owner/operator of a horse facility in Weatherford, Texas, says she didn't have any concern that a humanities degree would be impractical for her daughter. At Emory's freshman orientation, she remembers a professor saying "that while careers may change much more often these days, a good basic education gives us the tools to think through all kinds of work situations. He was right."



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the philosophy professor

After twenty-seven years at Emory, **Thomas Flynn, Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Philosophy**, can reel off plenty of success stories about Emory philosophy majors who have chosen interesting career paths. Steven Becknell is a great example. They have stayed in touch since Steven took his freshman seminar class.

"Steven's world was expanded by a liberal arts education," says Flynn. "He took a chance in going to Africa in his senior year. And it really rang his bell."

Flynn understands the pressures on students and parents: the high costs of a private education, the pre-professional mindset that is so pervasive in today's culture.

"Many parents are looking for the so-called cash value of a college education. But while we can show statistics that a degree from a business school will result in a little more income initially, that

isn't what we're about. We're about something else—you go to college to increase your possibilities in life."

He compares a good liberal arts education to a kaleidoscope. "If it works, you turn it a little bit and a whole new set of configurations emerges. And the student will not see the world in the same way afterwards like he or she did before looking into that kaleidoscope."

He tells the story of a young student at Emory who said she wasn't sure if she should go into business, law or medicine.

"She wasn't sure what would make her happy. I said to her, 'You're asking me the wrong question. The real choice is to become the person who's capable of being happy. Because if you don't become that kind of person, you're going to be an unhappy CEO, a frustrated lawyer, or an unfulfilled doctor.'"∞