

More seek philosophy degrees as a basis for kicking off other careers

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FORT COLLINS — Philosophy majors are not just contemplating the meaning of life — they are also launching careers in law, medicine, business and high technology.

"It's funny, but you don't look for philosophy; it finds you," said Autumn Mitchell, a Colorado State University student who is merging her philosophy studies with programming software.

She is part of a growing trend of college students gravitating toward philosophy departments. In the past 10 years, the number of four-year philosophy graduates grew 46 percent, besting such fields as history and psychology. That trend is mirrored at CSU, where philosophy-course enrollment jumped 17 percent in 2008 and the number of declared majors is at 80, up from 75 last year.

Certainly the total number of philosophy majors is dwarfed by fields such as science and business, both locally and nationally. But the numbers are healthy and steady, said professor Jane Kneller, who says philosophy is drawing people partly because they are seeking answers in an increasingly uncertain world.

"I do think we get more majors during times when the larger historical and political scene is in flux," said Kneller, chair of CSU's philosophy department. For instance, she said, enrollment boomed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

"People get interested in philosophy when they feel the need to get to the bottom of things, and to think about both the root causes of problems as well as big-picture visions for the future," she said.

A philosophy degree is also a traditional major of pre-law, pre-med and pre-seminary students. And because of its emphasis on informal and symbolic logic, it's an ideal basis for work in computer science, Kneller said.

And yet, a philosophy degree is still seen by many as a waste of time and money.

"When I told my dad I was majoring in philosophy, he said, 'Oh, no,' " said Kylie Wyse, a CSU senior who wants to be a lawyer.

"You usually get the line that 'Well, I guess you'll be working at McDonald's or Burger King,' " added Aaron Brunskill.

But philosophy students say the curriculum forces them to take apart arguments and stances and examine each one for its validity.

"You takes bits and pieces of an idea, and you put them all together to come up with a conclusion," Brunskill said. "It's training you to think, and that is valuable for anything you

pursue, especially the law."

Philosophy is especially worthy in a weak economy when students are lucky to find decent jobs in any field, Kneller said. "Having a degree in philosophy is good nowadays precisely because it prepares you for a variety of job situations," she said.

Recent philosophy graduates at CSU are working as political campaign coordinators, copyright-permission specialists and election administrators. But even if philosophers don't find a career related to their major, their studies have sparked something in CSU junior Nick Rogers.

"We can continue to read and study for the mental stimulation," he said. "At the very least, it's something I will always enjoy."

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