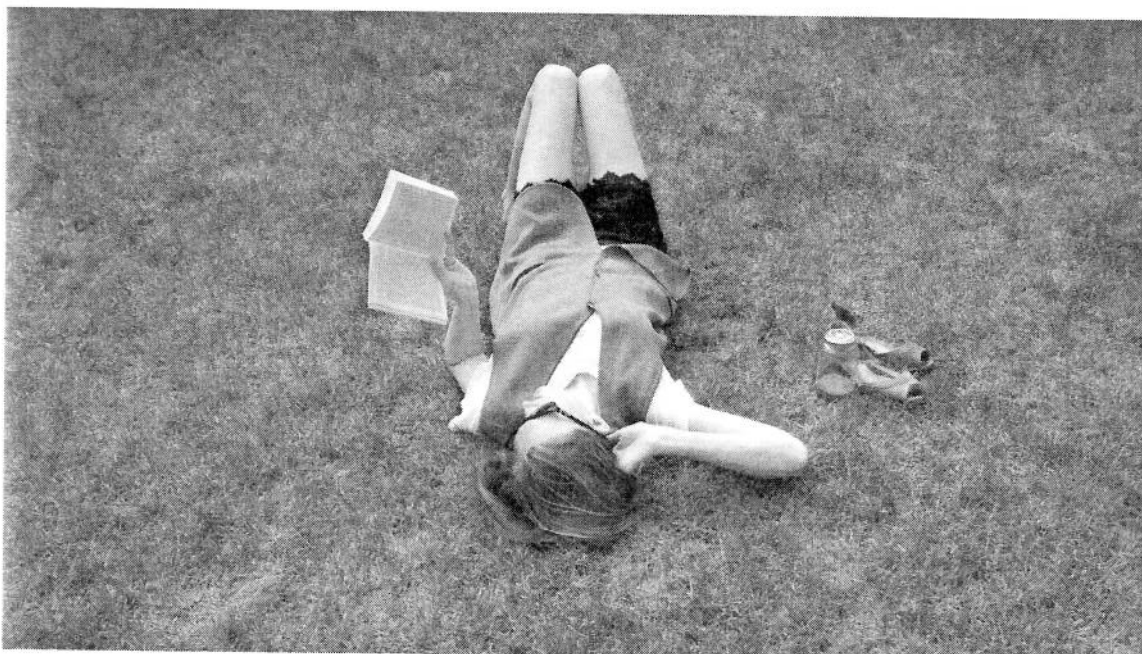


The Atlantic

BUSINESS

Rich Kids Study English

New data shows that students whose parents make less money pursue more “useful” subjects, such as math or physics.



Carlo Allegri / Reuters

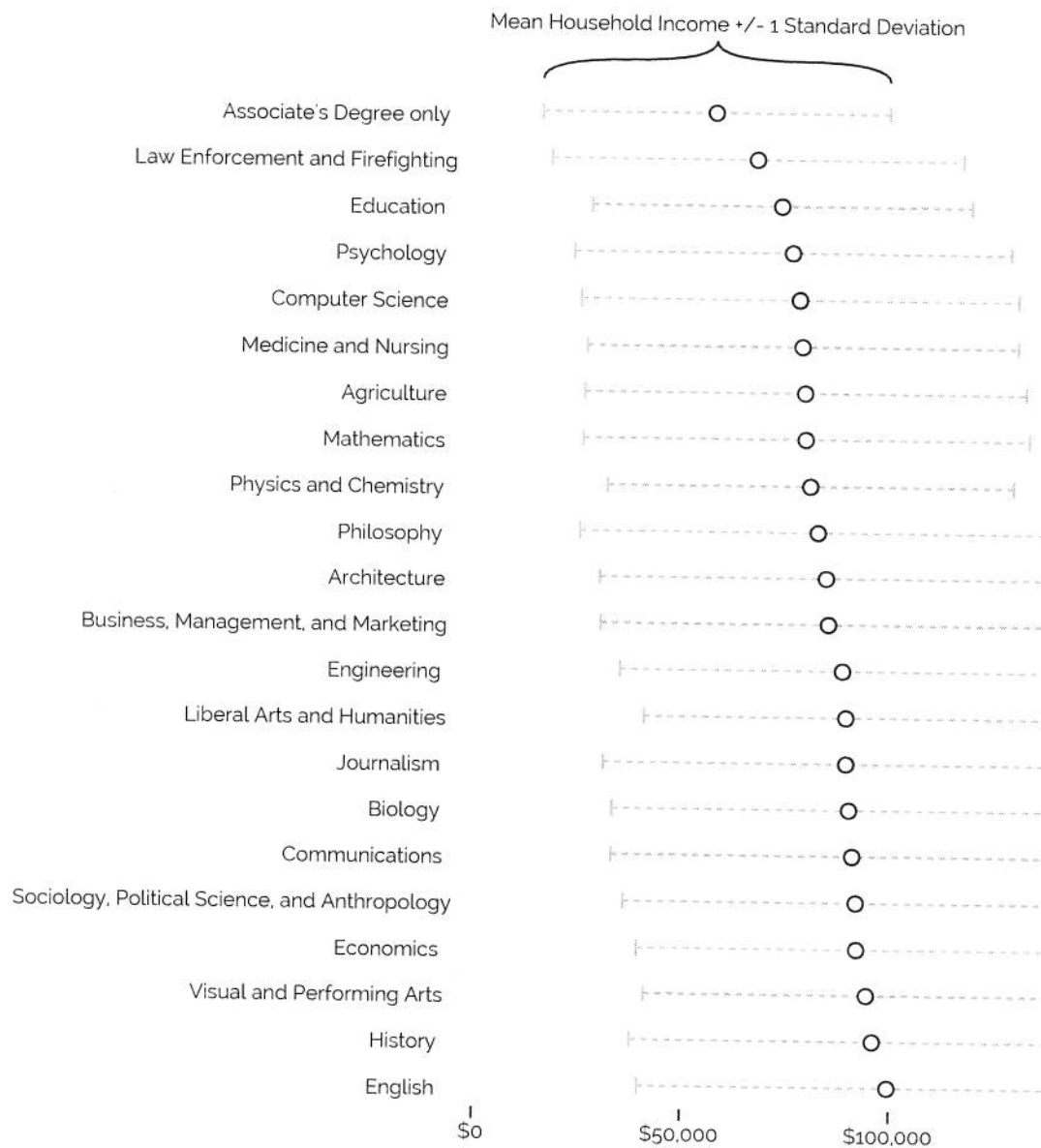
JOE PINSKER
JUL 6, 2015

In 1780, John Adams wrote a letter to his wife, Abigail, in which he laid out his plans for what his children and grandchildren would devote their lives to. Having himself taken the time to master “Politicks and War,” two revolutionary necessities, Adams hoped his children would go into disciplines that promoted nation-building, such as “mathematicks,” “navigation,” and “commerce.” His plan was that in turn, those practical

subjects would give his children's children room "to study painting, poetry, musick, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelaine."

Two-hundred and thirty-five years later, this progression—"from warriors to dilettantes," in the words of the literary scholar Geoffrey Galt Harpham—plays out much as Adams hoped it would: Once financial concerns have been covered by their parents, children have more latitude to study less pragmatic things in school. Kim Weeden, a sociologist at Cornell, looked at National Center for Education Statistics data for me after I asked her about this phenomenon, and her analysis revealed that, yes, the amount of money a college student's parents make does correlate with what that person studies. Kids from lower-income families tend toward "useful" majors, such as computer science, math, and physics. Those whose parents make more money flock to history, English, and performing arts.

How Does Choice of College Major Correlate With Parents' Household Income?



[Ben Southgate](#) | Data: Kim Weeden; National Center for Education Statistics

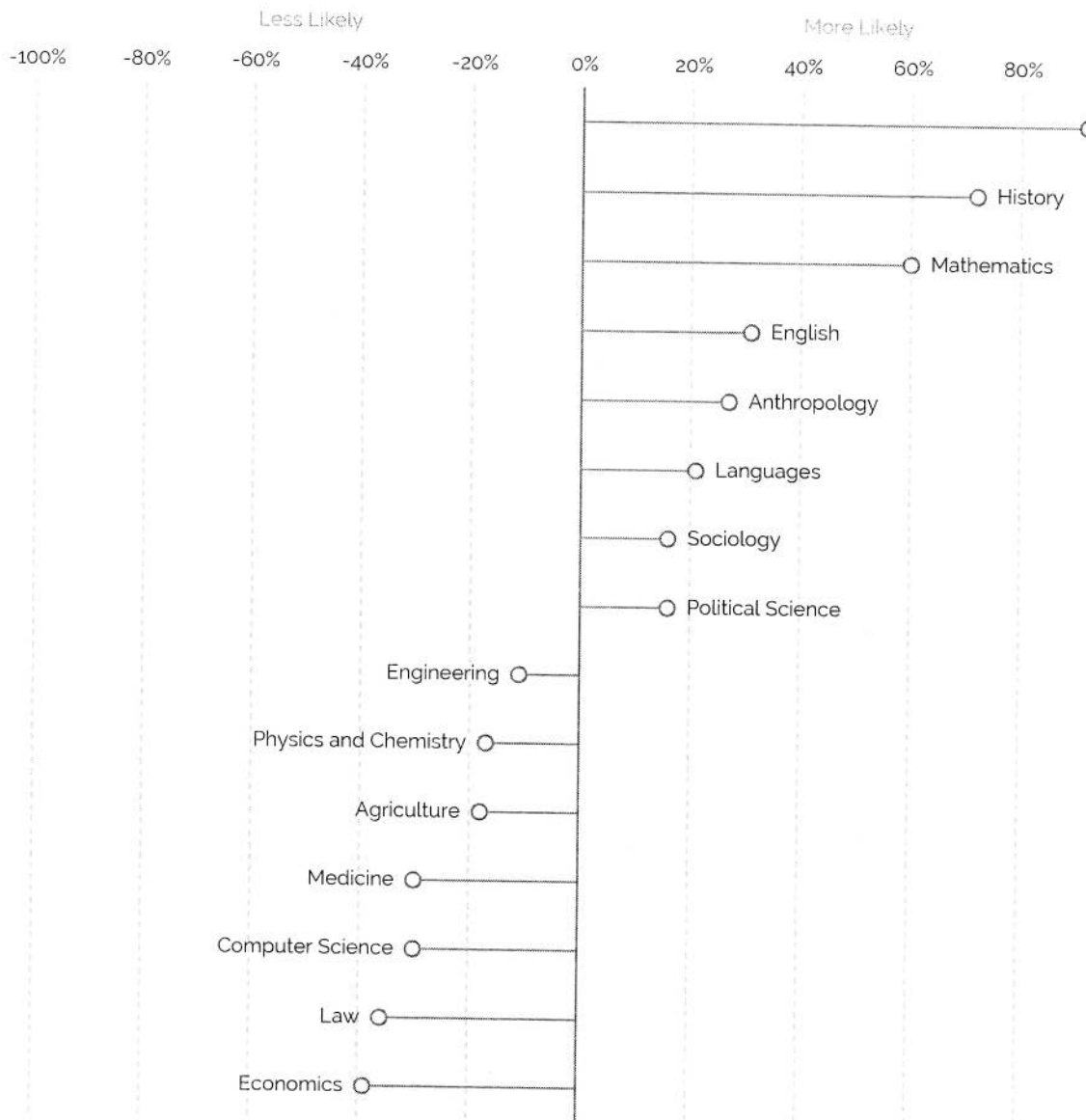
The explanation is fairly intuitive. “It’s ... consistent with the claim that kids from higher-earning families can afford to choose less vocational or instrumental majors, because they have more of a buffer against the risk of un- or under-employment,” Weeden says. With average earnings for different types of degrees as well-publicized as they are—the difference in lifetime earnings among majors can be more than \$3 million, one widely covered study found—it’s not hard to imagine a student deciding his or her academic path based on its expected payout. And it’s especially not hard

to imagine poorer kids making this calculation out of necessity, while richer kids forgo that means-to-an-end thinking.

Another trend expressed in the data, Weeden notes, is that lower-income families and higher-income families tend to send their children to schools with different options for majors: Most of the priciest, top-tier schools don't offer Law Enforcement as a major, for instance. There is also the possibility that children from higher-income families were more exposed to the sorts of art, music, and literature that colleges deem worthy of study, an exposure that might inspire them to pursue those subjects when they get to college.

The picture painted by Weeden's numbers is further filled in by data provided to me by Greg Clark, a professor of economics at the University of California, Davis, and the author of *The Son Also Rises*. Clark looked at the majors chosen by students who attended Cambridge University in the past 15 or so years, and he zeroed in on students who had rare, elite surnames—which he used as an indicator of high social status. When he compared the majors of those students to students with typical English surnames, he saw that the elite students were much more likely to study classics, English, and history, and much less likely to study computer science and economics.

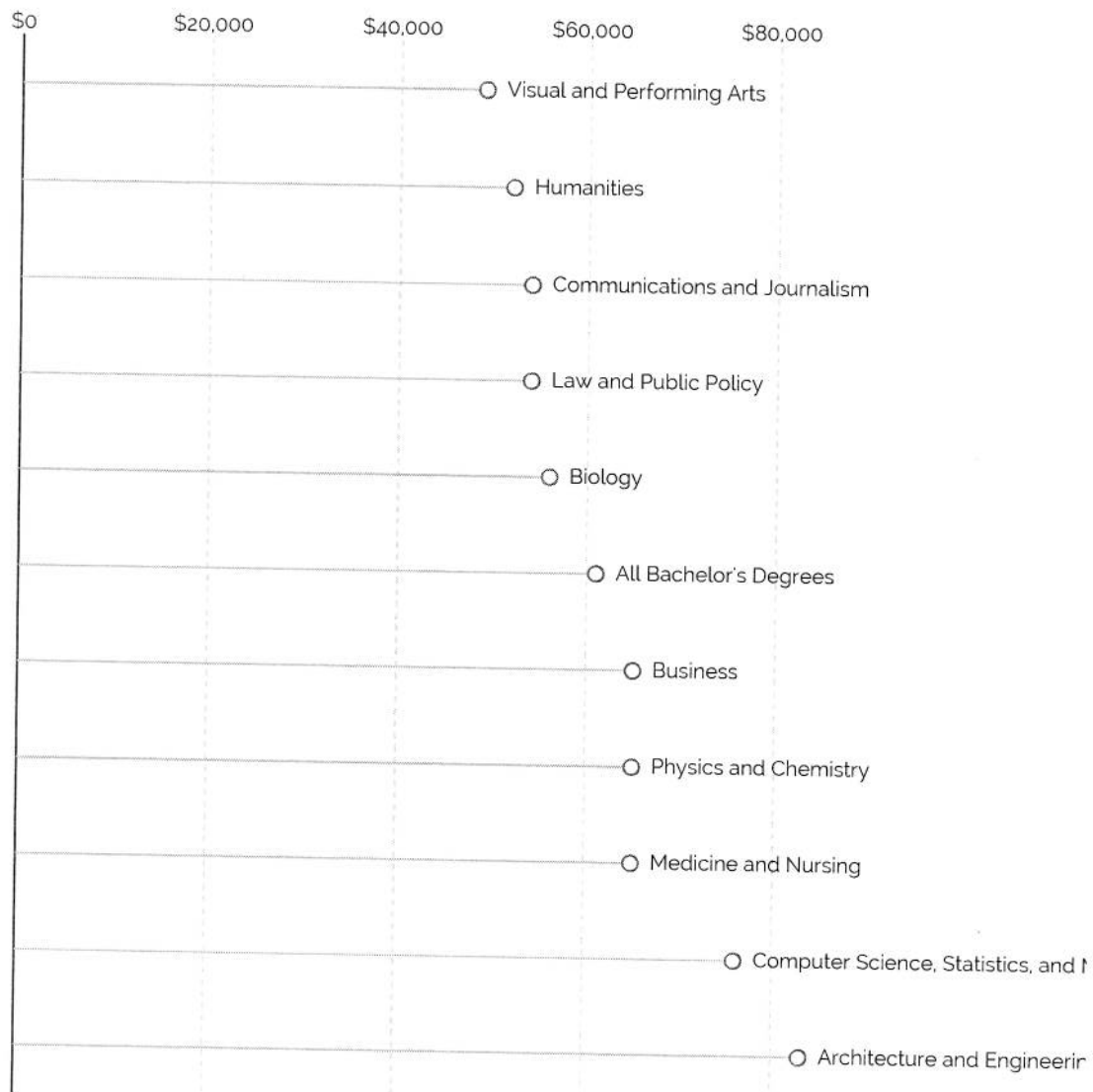
How Much More or Less Likely Are Cambridge Students With Rare, Elite Surnames to Choose Certain Majors?



Ben Southgate | Data: Gregory Clark

Clark's data, along with Weeden's, provides a reason to reexamine the expected-earnings-by-major statistics that are so often scrutinized by indecisive college students. One recent finding out of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce is that majoring in the humanities gets you about \$50,000 per year in median mid-career earnings, while a computer-science degree is good for about \$75,000 per year.

Median Mid-Career Yearly Earnings, by College Major



Ben Southgate | Data: Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce

It's easy to look at that chart and conclude that computer scientists end up wealthier than English majors. But these numbers could be skewed, in that they don't capture what Weeden's and Clark's data suggests: that students born with built-in financial safety nets are more likely to gravitate toward less-lucrative majors. It's speculative, but richer students might be going

on to take lower-paying jobs because they have the knowledge that their parents' money will arrive eventually.

The next step after examining college-major decisions is trying to think about how parents' income shapes job choice, a relationship that has not been deeply inspected in the academic literature. Last year, Quoc Trung Bui of NPR's *Planet Money* pulled data from the National Longitudinal Study and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and noticed that doctors and surgeons tended to come from families with lower incomes than musicians and artists. When compared to their parents, doctors on average improved on their parents' income by 40 percent. Artists, though, trailed their parents' earnings by 35 percent. (*Planet Money's* table showing these relationships is worth looking through.)

Still, it's important not to build any rigid theories around the correlations Bui found. Dalton Conley, a professor of sociology at New York University, noted that parents' household income is a pretty limited indicator—there's also their wealth, the prestige of their own jobs, and their educational attainment. “I personally find that when you put all of them in the model, the two that matter are a parent's education and parent's wealth,” Conley says.

Even though income and occupational prestige vary across generations, wealth and education levels remain relatively consistent over time. “There's a notion that what people are maximizing is not income, per se, or wealth, per se, or prestige, per se, but just there's a general sense of social class, and people in each generation make trade-offs,” says Conley. “It might seem like there's a lot of social mobility that the offspring of doctors are artists, or what have you, but maybe they traded off occupational autonomy and freedom ... They still have a high education level and they still have wealth.”

From this angle, college majors and occupations start to look more and more like easily-interpreted, if slightly crude, badges doled out to people based on the wealth and educational levels of the parents they were born to. There's a reason that the first question asked at parties is often "So, what do you do?" "If we tend to avoid asking acquaintances about their income," four prominent sociologists wrote in the 2011 anthology *The Inequality Reader*, "it's not just because doing so is viewed as too intrusive and personal but also because we suspect that querying about occupation will yield more in the way of useful information."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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