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Top students commit to using their knowledge

By Tracey Wong Briggs, USA TODAY

What can you do with a philosophy degree? Plenty, if you ask members of USA TODAY's All-USA College Academic First Team.



Cristina Bejan (left) and Bethany Ehlmann members of USA TODAY's 2004 All-USA college Academic Team.

By Anne Ryan and Bob Riha, Jr., USA Today

Of the 20 undergraduates selected for this year's top honors, four are philosophy majors. None of the four started out majoring in philosophy. But even before receiving degrees, they're putting their training to use in a variety of ways:

- Cristina Bejan of Northwestern wrote and produced two plays during her junior year abroad at Oxford. In *To Those Who Haven't Stopped Thinking*, a theatrical counterpart to her honors thesis, a philosopher travels from the Beyond to help people who don't want to be helped. The drama, inspired by work she had done in Romania, played in June to sold-out crowds at Oxford's Burton Taylor Theatre.

Bejan has written five plays in college, all dealing with what it means to be human and how people strive to make life meaningful. "I'm not trying to give an answer to any question, but attempt to show individuals in a particular situation and the decisions they make," she says. "Hopefully, those ideas inspire the audience and the people in the play to search for their own answers."

- Working with the Tulsa Police Department, Jon Novotny of the University of Tulsa took the lead in developing tools to monitor chat rooms and remotely "fingerprint" computers for cybercrime investigations.

Adding a philosophy major to his computer science major has taught him to see the bigger picture and keep his mind open to the entire spectrum of possibilities, Novotny says. "Overall, it's trained me to be a better thinker and a better writer, which has had a significant impact on the papers I've written in computer science."

- Sara Shoener credits the philosophy-steeped Special Jesuit Liberal Arts program at the University of Scranton with teaching her to seek the broader context and deeper root of problems. She founded the university's Women's Leadership Delegation to get female campus leaders talking to each other.

"So many people think philosophy isn't practical," says Shoener, who also is studying biomathematics for a double major and plans to be a women's health advocate. "It's the most practical thing I've ever done."

- Ryan Keller of Brigham Young University found that studying philosophy opened his mind to different perspectives, making him more effective in his mission work in Guatemala and in his work on a peace

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initiative with the government of Senegal.

"I honestly believe philosophy better prepared me for a career in public service than any other major could," says Keller, who also is studying his sixth language, Arabic.

The four, along with 16 others, are named to the 2004 First Team as representatives of all outstanding undergraduates at the nation's four-year colleges and universities. They each receive a trophy and a \$2,500 cash award. Forty more students are named to the Second and Third Teams.

"Over the 15 years we've been honoring these teams, we have spotlighted students who've taken their education beyond bettering themselves to bettering the world," USA TODAY editor Karen Jurgensen says. "We salute these students to call attention to some of the good things happening at the nation's colleges and universities."

First Team members were selected from 604 nominees by educational professionals in a two-step judging process. All members of this year's team excel in the classroom: They have a combined grade-point average of 3.89 on a scale in which 4.0 is all A's. The 19 seniors and one junior carry a total of 31 undergraduate majors, two of which are self-designed. One, Chia Jung-Tsay of Harvard, is earning a concurrent master's degree.

But in addition to amassing transcripts full of A's, First Team members are applying their skills far beyond the classroom:

- Zachery Keplinger Coelius of the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities co-founded and is executive director of Votes for Students, an e-mail voter registration campaign that reached 500,000 college students in 10 states before the 2002 election. With a \$100,000 research grant from the Pew Trusts, Coelius is working with political scientists to analyze data from the campaign to gauge how effective e-mail is in getting out the youth vote.
- Bethany Ehlmann of Washington University in St. Louis is spending her last semester at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., as a collaborating scientist on the Mars Exploration Rover team. Ehlmann's work began her freshman year, when she helped design and test methods for gauging soil properties based on how the rovers drive over the terrain. Working shifts that get 40 minutes later each day to account for Mars' longer days, Ehlmann is helping design the rovers' activities and document their findings.
- Tamar Losleben, who grew up in developing countries as the daughter of a USAID professional, co-founded a chapter of Engineers Without Borders at Rice University in Houston. The Rice students traveled to Mali last summer to help turn a mosquito-attracting swamp into a rain-collection bin for drip irrigation, and Losleben has inspected potential projects in El Salvador and Mexico.

A world of wonders

As many different directions as their studies and passions have carried them, First Team members share a stubborn, expansive curiosity. The philosophy majors aren't the only ones who feel well served by a broad-based education. Several First Team members see their work as a logical extension of their love of learning.

"I was definitely one of those kids who checked just about every box of interests and potential majors — international relations, chemistry, astronomy, zoology. It ran the gamut," says Ehlmann, who is a double major in earth and planetary science and environmental science. "I think for me, personally, kind of having the big picture makes the technical work more interesting."

Rosita Najmi entered Wake Forest University considering a business major, but after studying microfinance in Benin, West Africa, she changed to economics.

"I can't imagine sitting through a political science class without understanding the economics," she says. Economics crosses every other discipline and helps her understand not just the big picture but also her role in it, says Najmi, who co-founded a non-profit organization to improve health care access in Benin.

"Adam Smith talks about this invisible hand that guides the market to reach an equilibrium point where everyone is happy, and things are efficient," she says. A broad-based education, along with her heart and Baha'i faith, helps Najmi "connect the supply-and-demand curves to reach an equilibrium in my life."

Work for social change

Ultimately, First Team members back up their curiosity with uncommon commitment.

Ross Meyer of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, traces his interest in urban studies and public policy to the ninth grade, when a teacher took him to serve a meal at a homeless shelter in Cincinnati's impoverished Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. That evening, a woman started telling him about her struggles and took him to task when he tried to politely agree: "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Rather than driving Meyer away, the woman's tirade — "You have no idea what I mean!" — provoked his curiosity to better understand his privileged upbringing and how it was so different from hers.

Throughout high school, he kept going back to Over-the-Rhine, volunteering at the shelter and with after-school programs and low-income housing organizations. At Miami University, he has organized 20 weekend service learning trips to give an upfront look at class and race conflicts in urban America to students who live 45 minutes and a world away.

"It was such a powerful experience for me, who I was and my goals and my passions, that when I went to Miami ... I wanted to bring that experience to other students," says Meyer, who has gone on to serve on human rights delegations to Cuba, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

Meyer's eight-year relationship with Over-the-Rhine has showed him that any type of social change takes more than voting or serving a meal at a soup kitchen. After researching colleges renowned for their community partnerships, he wrote a proposal and initiated a Social Action Center to use campus and academic resources to bring about social change.

Miami's Social Action Center brings Meyer's community work together with his academic studies, which incorporate sociology, political science and economics. He has designed his own interdisciplinary major in public policy and social inequality.

"Social problems are so complex, they demand complex solutions," he says. "Only by looking at it from multiple perspectives can we ever get to the root of these problems."

Like many of the other First Team members, Meyer finds that his hands-on work and personal experiences bring depth and purpose to academia's more detached, analytical approaches.

"In my experience, when those two are coupled and integrated, that's when the most powerful learning takes place."

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