

Think
liberal arts
aren't worth
much?

Think AGAIN.

The Internet as we know it did not exist when Gary Kunis '73, then an engineer at Boeing, was asked to roll out a network that would connect an array of computers at universities and research institutions throughout the Northwest. It was 1986 and Boeing had just agreed to help the National Science Foundation develop a system that would allow scientists to communicate with one another via computer, a concept still in its infancy in the United States.

In a couple of months, Kunis unveiled a network to link computers from Alaska to Oregon and out to the Dakotas, the largest of several regional systems that would merge into the Internet. Five years later, he left for Cisco Systems Inc., a start-up in California he helped build into the world's leading networking company, where, as chief science officer, he managed engineering and business development and European and Japanese operations before his retirement in 2002.

To listen to Kunis chronicle his career, you might expect that he has a background in computer science, engineering or business administration. Yet Kunis, described as an Internet pioneer, majored in history and math at Binghamton University's Harpur College of Arts and Sciences. He later earned a master's degree in economics from Tufts University, but credits his success squarely to his undergraduate education.

BY SHERRIE NEGREA

A brief history of Harpur

Binghamton traces its origins to Harpur College, which in 1950 became a liberal arts college of the newly established State University of New York. President Glenn G. Bartle's vision was to create a public liberal arts college that offered an education equal to that provided by the best private schools, a "public Swarthmore." He and faculty such as Bernard F. Huppé, Kenneth C. Lindsay, Peter N. Vukasin and Ralph Digman quickly realized that vision. By the 1960s, Harpur had earned a reputation for offering bright, highly motivated students an exceptional liberal arts education.

In the intervening years, much has changed. A small liberal arts college has become the core of a first-rate research university of almost 15,000 students. Harpur College boasts 16 PhD programs and more than 20 master's programs, and its faculty members are internationally recognized for their research. Yet Harpur remains true to Bartle's vision of offering undergraduates a liberal arts education that is second to none.

- ▶ Read more about the history of Harpur College at binghamton.edu/harpur.
- ▶ Help celebrate Harpur College's 60th anniversary at Homecoming, Oct. 8-10. Details at binghamton.edu/alumni.



Breaking ground for the new Harpur College campus are, left to right (holding shovels), Charles F. Johnson Jr., chairman of the Harpur College Council (and of Endicott-Johnson Shoe Corp.); Gov. Thomas E. Dewey; and William S. Carlson, president of the State University of New York. The gentleman at right is former Lt. Gov. Frank C. Moore, presiding officer of the University Board of Trustees.

"I think a liberal arts-oriented education is an essential for the world of technology," says Kunis, who lives in Seattle. "If you're going into technology, any set of courses or any undergraduate major has to have a heavy emphasis of liberal arts. You have to understand problem solving. You have to understand how to communicate. You have to understand how to write. These skills don't go away."

REINVENTING LIBERAL ARTS

As Harpur College celebrates its 60th anniversary this year, many liberal arts undergraduate programs across the country are reinventing themselves in the face of declining student interest and financial pressures. Even at Binghamton, parents of many students question whether a liberal arts degree is a solid foundation for a successful career, says Gerald Kadish, a distinguished teaching professor of history.

At a panel discussion titled "Dead or Alive? A Liberal Arts Education," held during Homecoming last year, Kadish argued it was alive but bleeding.

"In general, it's been in trouble, not because of any decline in its quality or basic ideas, but because students are increasingly interested in concrete job opportunities," he says. "I think parents, who have always been suspicious of liberal arts education, are encouraging students to be undergraduate business or engineering majors."

Despite these challenges, the liberal arts are not only alive but flourishing at Binghamton. Harpur College remains what

Dean Donald G. Nieman calls "the intellectual heart" of the University. Instead of cutting programs, Harpur is adding new disciplines, such as the Department of Asian and Asian American Studies.

Despite increasing specialization in the job market, enrollment in Harpur continues to grow. With 7,592 undergraduates and 1,134 graduate students, Harpur is the largest of Binghamton's six schools, comprising 59 percent of the University's total enrollment. Moreover, students in all schools at Binghamton take foundational courses in Harpur. As a result, Harpur faculty members teach 71 percent of all the University's courses.

BUILD A GOOD FOUNDATION

Binghamton students are drawn to a liberal arts education, and with good reason. "I would argue that a liberal arts degree is just as valuable now as it was in 1950," Nieman says. "I think it provides the same kinds of skills and the same habits of mind in the 21st century that it provided at Harpur's inception. And those skills and habits of mind are perhaps more valuable now because of the dramatic changes in careers that most of our graduates will experience."

Take Ravi Gupta '05, who has already switched careers by age 27. After graduating with a double major in science, and public policy and philosophy, Gupta earned a degree at Yale Law School while working full-time on President Barack Obama's campaign. Just before Obama's inauguration last

year, Gupta became the special assistant to the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice. This spring, he was hired by Building Excellent Schools, a foundation funding the development of a charter school in New York City.

“Obviously we live in a world where concrete skills are very, very important,” says Gupta, the former debate team captain at Binghamton. “But in a lot of jobs out there, if you’re on a campaign, in law school or in diplomacy, the skills are less definable. A lot of the programs in liberal arts at Binghamton can provide you the skills to recognize foundational principles and to be able to debate first principles. Those are very important skills to have.”

With many students focused on high-paying jobs, Gupta’s decision to study philosophy seems to buck the trend. Yet out of 27 programs offered by Harpur, its philosophy, politics and law program — a unique interdisciplinary major — is the fifth most popular, with biological sciences first, followed by English, psychology and economics. That may explain why the classes of Tony Preus, distinguished teaching professor of philosophy, are always full, with 149 students enrolled in his law and justice class last fall and 95 in his Plato and Aristotle class this spring.



WEB EXTRA

A liberal arts degree can offer flexibility in an uncertain job market. binghamton.edu/magazine

Besides pursuing teaching careers, philosophy majors from Binghamton have become computer scientists, business managers and lawyers, Preus notes. “Philosophical training is something that enables people to deal with a wide range of issues,” he says. “It improves your ability to think critically on a wide range of subjects so that you’re ready to deal with whatever intellectual challenges life brings you.”

A broad-based education lies at the foundation not only of

Harpur but of Binghamton’s five professional schools. Despite his liberal arts background, Kunis has been a major supporter of the Thomas J. Watson School of Engineering and Applied Science, which, he says, along with Binghamton’s other schools, stems from “Harpur’s set of core values.” In 2000, Kunis made the first \$1 million gift from an individual to the University, designating it for scholarships for computer science students and a laboratory at the Watson School.

But he points out that anything a student learns in a technology course will be obsolete within 36 months. What’s more important, Kunis says, is a well-rounded education. “You’ve got to be a problem solver. You’ve got to be able to write well and document everything that you’ve done. That’s why a liberal arts education is so important.” **B**

Humanities institute will get people talking

Professors will present lectures on the humanities at libraries and places of worship. Undergraduates will lead discussions on great books in local schools. And scholars at the University will receive fellowships to write, conduct research and share their work with colleagues from other disciplines. It’s all part of the newly created Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities.

This fall, the institute will bring discussions of literature, history, philosophy, politics, art and culture into the community and support interdisciplinary research on campus. With the creation of the institute last summer, Binghamton joins a group of more than 150 centers worldwide that have been developed to promote scholarship in the humanities, according to the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, based at Duke University.

“The humanities, though underfunded, are one of the most important things we can do to have an educated citizenry,” says Bat-Ami Bar On, a professor of philosophy and of women’s studies who is the director of the new institute. “It’s very easy to be overwhelmed by the issues that any society in the 21st century faces. I think we see that daily, but we do know that the humanities make a difference in terms of feeling really empowered and talking about ideas.”

The institute will grant fellowships to eight faculty members who will be released from teaching a course so they can devote greater attention to research and participate in a weekly seminar with other fellows, including graduate and undergraduate students and community members.

A key goal of the institute is to promote spirited intellectual exchange among faculty and students from a variety of disciplines. As a special project, the institute last year assembled two groups of faculty members to discuss their research in two areas: democracy and the humanities, and genocide and the Holocaust.

“Many humanities scholars, unlike scientists, work in isolation,” says Donald G. Nieman, dean of Harpur College of Arts and Sciences. “They are engaged mainly in single-authored publications. The Humanities Institute is designed to bring people together from across disciplines to discover intellectual connections and create an intellectual community.”