



Save the Humanities

Why a Traditional Liberal Education Still Makes Sense

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A February 2002 *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece on the waning influence of New England's colleges and universities suggests at one point that the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum with which the region has long been identified is out of date. Young people today focus more than ever on the careers awaiting them after college. They view higher education as job training. To stay competitive in attracting the best undergraduates from all over the country, one college official proposed, New England colleges and universities need to adopt curricula that connect more directly to what students want to be doing after they graduate.

It is true that undergraduates and their parents increasingly obsess about getting their money's worth out of education for what it can do for a lifetime of work and income. Writing in *Harvard Magazine* in 1998, James Engell, a professor of English and comparative religion at Harvard, and Anthony Dangerfield, who has taught at Dartmouth, observed that over the past 30 years, the motivation of students for choosing and attending college has shifted from an interest in learning for its own sake to a preoccupation with jobs, from building a foundation for values to equipping graduates for high wages.

Still, the notion that a traditional liberal arts course of study is somehow out of step with modern realities and with the fundamental purposes of education is unsettling.

Especially so because the liberal arts are grounded in the humanities—language and literature, history and philosophy, culture and religious studies.

Engell and Dangerfield noted that colleges and universities nationally have been ignoring and downsizing the humanities. These departments find it difficult to compete on campus with those that study money, like economics or business, promise students high-paying jobs immediately after graduation, like computer science, or bring in the largest government grants and contracts, like the natural and physical sciences. More than 30 years ago, journalist and author James Ridgeway portrayed the American university as “a center for industrial activity,” feeding off defense and corporate research dollars which, in turn, infects the culture of the Ivory Tower.

Enrollments in the humanities are declining, and the students that remain attracted to the humanities are not always the strongest. Kenneth Jackson, president of the Organization of American Historians, notes that the nation's colleges and universities conferred an all-time high of nearly 45,000 undergraduate history degrees in 1971—or 5 percent of the total. By 1986, the number had plummeted to 16,000, or 2 percent of the total. In 2000, history majors accounted for just 1 percent. English, philosophy, foreign languages and religion have declined as well, while computer science, public administration and business management, among others, increased dramatically.

In 1971, business majors outnumbered English majors by 78 percent. By 1994, the differential had ballooned to 300 percent.

Engell and Dangerfield also lamented that humanities scholars have not used the power of senior administrative posts—nor the opportunity of faculty meetings—to stem their disciplines’ declining status on campus. We found that more than one-third of the presidents and chief academic officers at more than 20 of New England’s most highly rated private colleges and universities as well as the six flagship state universities hold graduate degrees in one of the humanities. Yet, the decline is evident in New England too. In the 1970s, one-third of Harvard students concentrated in the humanities. By the late 1990s, less than one-quarter did. At Tufts University, almost 25 percent of graduating seniors took degrees in the humanities at the start of the 1990s. By the end of the decade, barely 15 percent did.

Other trends are alarming. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, recent budget cuts have led to the closing of the foreign language lab and threats to the language requirement itself as the administration merges or abolishes several foreign language departments. Other humanities departments such as English and Theater are in danger of losing new faculty hires and graduate teaching assistants. Humanities programs are often the first to be slashed in budgetary crises, partly because university administrators woefully misjudge the relevance of the humanities and liberal arts education to *every* course of study.

Making the case

A strong liberal education enhances communications skills and encourages critical thinking. A course of study steeped in the humanities and related disciplines produces truly well-rounded people prepared for whatever the modern business and job world can throw at them. The new chief executive of IBM, Samuel Palmisano, was an undergraduate history major at Johns Hopkins. Carly Fiorina, his counterpart at Hewlett-Packard, studied medieval history and philosophy at Stanford.

Daniel A. Rabuzzi, the associate vice president at the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, has written that the new knowledge-based economy with its fast-paced style places a premium on “creativity, rhetorical deftness, structured spontaneity and critical thinking—all qualities that are at the heart of liberal education.” When asked how colleges could best prepare people for jobs in the technology economy, former New Hampshire state representative and high-tech executive Bill Belvin was fond of displaying a chart showing that the vast majority of people earning six figures at one hot Route 128 high-tech firm had either no college degree or degrees in “non-IT” fields from art history to music.

What’s more, the humanities are not, as some may think, stuck in place. New approaches and creative scholarship have enhanced the humanities no less than other disciplines in recent years. Fresh readings of traditional texts and a focus on new texts, such as those from non-Western cultures, have enlivened the study of literature and cultural expression. Historians have adapted social science theory and methodology to the special demands of their own craft while turning to new kinds of source material, including objects of material culture, to explore the past from new perspectives and give voice to groups whose experiences were never included in the curriculum. Philosophers now engage with psychologists and neuroscientists to understand consciousness and thought while also pursuing programs to apply ethics theory to policymaking in such areas as community health and criminal justice.

It makes no sense to pit the humanities and related fields against scientific, business and technical training in the claim for relevance. The point is not the superiority of one over the other, but rather the importance of the humanities to any course of study. As colleges attempt to give students the technical proficiency required of some of today’s best jobs, they should not squeeze out the humanities.

Moreover, there is another reason for colleges to value the humanities.

It has to do with how they prepare and encourage students to become active and effective citizens.

Preparing citizens

Most people would like to believe that education is about enlightenment, about broadening one’s awareness and ways of viewing the world, about expanding intellectual horizons and curiosity. It is also about perspective, about deepening one’s understanding through a knowledge of and appreciation for what has gone on in the past and how the modern world has evolved. All disciplines contribute in one way or another to these aspects of learning, but the humanities do it in a fundamental way.

In a just-published study, political scientist Henry Milner concludes that today’s young people in the United States have more formal education than older generations and are more willing to get involved in community service—a measure of social capital. But they are less politically active and they vote less. Milner says this is because they are less knowledgeable about the political world and less able to make sense of it to form opinions leading to active involvement in the democratic process. In short, social capital alone does not make for a strong democracy—knowledge, awareness and informed discourse do. Milner blames the low quality of television and other sources of information for the poor state of our civic literacy. Might it also be because more of our young people are going to college to be trained for jobs?

Colleges and universities everywhere have begun to appreciate the role they can play in encouraging civic engagement. Tufts has established a University College of Citizenship and Public Service as the centerpiece of its commitment to educating for a lifetime of active citizenship. A key strategy is to enhance the capacity of the faculty in all Tufts’ schools to develop projects, teach courses and conduct research that promote civic engagement. But at its core, the University College is an enterprise in undergraduate education where the liberal arts curriculum can instill the values and perspectives that help

students understand why and how voluntarism and public service are important. The University College is not a separate program of study, nor is the intent to offer specialized degrees that might only compartmentalize the effort. Rather, the point is to let each academic discipline explore the connection on its own terms.

The humanities play an especially important role here in providing the historical and philosophical basis for the commitment to the community and civic engagement. Stanford education professor William Damon reminds us that civic life is invigorated because of the power of ideas, not because of social policies and requirements. Just as understanding the law deters crime more effectively than fear of punishment, so a robust civic culture will flow from respect for its virtues rather than from artificial insertions of community service into schooling or from measures that would require people to register to vote.

By providing the critical thinking skills, the historical and cultural perspective and the philosophical inquiry into human morals and behavior, the humanities help us make the informed judgments that generate interest in public issues and infuse civil society and, ultimately, the democratic process. The richness and increasing inclusiveness of humanities curricula forges a natural connection between learning in the classroom and some of the most pressing social or political issues churning beyond the walls of the university. Interdisciplinary programs to which the humanities make a strong contribution, such as women's studies, peace and justice studies, or international studies, carry with them an impulse toward civic engagement, often nurtured through class projects or program internships that involve students in the wider community.

Perhaps most of all, the humanities build the case for tolerance—the inherent respect for others that may be the single most important feature of a robust civic culture. The humanities do this because they study diversity

for its own sake. Consider, for example, the way a student of marketing might think about diversity. Age, gender and other characteristics define people differently as consumers of various products. They are important for how they buy, not for who they are. The humanities, on the other hand, view the community more broadly, taking the full measure of all the parts that comprise it. This encourages students to think about what they can do for the larger community of which they are a part. People are more likely to respond to difference with suspicion if they have not been ushered into the inner life of diverse cultures through study in the humanities. Through the richness of language and literary imagination, for example, the humanities open a revealing window into the experiences of other people—cultures that students might otherwise never have come to know and therefore never have cared about.

Martha C. Nussbaum, the distinguished University of Chicago professor of law and ethics, describes the humanities' emphasis on diversity as an effort "to produce adults who can function as citizens not just of some local region or group but also, and more importantly, as citizens of a complex and interlocking world." If the undergraduate curriculum becomes more fully organized around career training, will our newly educated young people be as capable of becoming civic-minded and taking an active role in our democracy? Let New England embrace and strengthen its leadership in a humanities-rich liberal education. Our civic culture will be better for it.

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