

Reclaiming the Humanities: Education Beyond Career Training

The humanities are vanishing because we no longer understand what they're for.

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7/25/2024

Updated: 7/25/2024

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Commentary

Last February, *The New Yorker* published an account of the plummeting enrollment numbers in university humanities programs. Nathan Heller, who penned the piece, shares some dour news for the bibliophiles and aesthetes among us: From 2012 to 2020, humanities graduates at Ohio State fell by 46 percent, at Tufts by 50 percent, at Boston University by 42 percent, and at Notre Dame by 50 percent. And this sampling of colleges is representative of higher education in general: Over the last 10 years, the study of English and history in college has collapsed by a full third and humanities majors in the United States have declined by 17 percent.

Mr. Heller explores the state of affairs in humanities programs in an evenhanded way, analyzing various factors and positing various explanations for the demise of these once-prized programs of study. These factors include student concerns over career outlook if they get a humanities degree; an overall societal decline in reading and literacy, due largely to technology; loss of funding for humanities departments and projects; a growing sense of the irrelevancy of the humanities compared to their “rigorous” science counterparts; and student dissatisfaction with the content and methods of these courses. Much of Mr. Heller’s examination looks sound, but I’d like to offer an elaboration on some points that he touches on in passing.

The humanities crisis turns on a misunderstanding of what education is really for. Most modern universities have adopted one or both of two insufficient understandings of education: that it is merely for career training or that it is for political indoctrination. The mystery of the collapse of interest in the humanities is no mystery at all when it becomes clear that we are misusing the humanities. A snow shovel isn’t going to sell very well if it’s being marketed as a tool to chop wood.

Let’s take the question of career training first. Of course a college education must take into account career. We have bodies to be clothed and fed, after all. But we also have souls, which a pragmatic approach to education tends to forget.

A true education takes into account the whole human being, not merely his material needs. Mr. Heller interviews several students who veered away from an English major for fear that they wouldn't make any money with it. This reflects a prevailing mindset of students—and often faculty and staff as well—who think the purpose of college is simply to get a good job. The university is a kind of complicated vending machine: put in the cash and the time, and it will eventually kick out a tasty, marketable degree with which you can provide for yourself comfortably. Get in, get out, get on with your life.

Humanities degrees, incidentally, do provide you with marketable skills (communication, analytical thinking, people skills, etc.). But students are generally correct that they'll make more money in a STEM field. This is an economic symptom of society's devaluation of the arts and humanities, and the universities' emphasis on their shiny new labs and workshops is ultimately a reflection of market pressures outside the walls of the school. We place monetary value on studies and skills that produce tangible and quantifiable products: a self-driving car; a new drug; a more high-powered cellphone.

Since the arts and humanities shape primarily the human character itself, there are no tangible products—at least, not right away. And so there's no economic value that we can easily quantify. “Give me more engineers,” says the economy. “What use to me are these besotted and bespectacled poets and painters, busy refining their own imaginations, emotions, and wills?” So the university puts its funding toward the new computer lab, and the students, who have bought into an economic educational model, flock to it.

But what if education was never about making money (at least not primarily)? What if there was something more fundamental to us than learning how to make money, such as learning how to be human? Professor and [educator John Senior](#) writes, “The purpose of the humanities is not knowledge but to humanize.” I have yet to encounter a non-human college student, and therefore every student can benefit from a humanities education. We might even say that such an education is not only beneficial but also essential. One of Senior's

own teachers, Mark Van Doren, explains in his 1943 book “[Liberal Education](#)”:

“[The humanities’] intrinsic importance is so great that their champions ... are of course correct in insisting that they are necessary rather than nice. Poetry, story, and speculation are more than pleasant to encounter; they are indispensable if we would know ourselves as men. To live with Herodotus, Euripides, Aristotle, Lucretius, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Pascal, Swift, Balzac, Dickens, or Tolstoy—to take only a few names at random and to add no musicians, painters, or sculptors—is to be wiser than experience can make us in those deep matters that have most closely to do with family, friends, rulers, and whatever gods there be. To live with them is indeed experience of the essential kind, since it takes us beyond the local and the accidental, at the same moment that it lets us know how uniquely valuable a place and a time can be.”

Clearly, then, the humanities are to be studied for their own sake, for the way that they open our eyes to universal truths. These truths are, on the one hand, practical for the art of living well, and on the other, wonderfully impractical in the sense that they are worth knowing for their own sake, as an end in themselves, not as a means to some pragmatic goal (like more zeroes in a bank account). To know something of the universe, of human nature, makes us more fully what we’re meant to be.

Van Doren wrote: “The aim of liberal education is one’s own excellence, the perfection of one’s own intellectual character. Liberal education makes the person competent, not merely to know or do, but also, and indeed chiefly, to be.”

We needn’t be asking more from the humanities (or perhaps even the sciences) than that.

Many English or history departments have retained vestiges of this notion—an understanding that they have more important work to do than just career training. Unfortunately, this understanding has

become perverted, which brings us to the second reason I believe humanities programs are in decline: politicization.

In the first place, some college administrations have begun dictating professors' approach to humanities subjects along political lines, thus stifling the truly free atmosphere in which the liberal arts thrive. Michael Larson, a former college English instructor, described his experience to me: "The state system of colleges and universities became oppressively regulatory about what we could and could not offer, about what 'goals' or 'outcomes' should be attached to our courses ... further than that, they even in some cases dictated what *viewpoint* about the subject matter was to be taught in order to make sure that all [students had] the same state-approved world view."

There's also the cultural and political persuasion of students themselves to consider. Mr. Heller writes: "Tara K. Menon, a junior professor ... linked the shift [in enrollment in humanities] to students arriving at college with a sense that the unenlightened past had nothing left to teach. At Harvard, as elsewhere, courses ... have been the focus of student concerns about too few Black artists in syllabi, or Eurocentric biases."

Here, we see that [the monster of neo-Marxism](#), unleashed in higher education, has returned to bite its promoters. If you teach enough generations that their cultural heritage is ignorant, unenlightened, and racist, pretty soon they're not going to be interested in studying it anymore. And that's precisely what has been occurring in most universities for some years now, as I can attest based on my own experience when I was an English major.

The students who have adopted narratives about the evil of Western culture are rejecting the humanities as a result, while those who have not been tainted by such ideas know that the politicized programs have nothing to offer them. As Mr. Larson put it: "Students with good, curious minds are always interested in the greatest achievements of human intellectual and artistic endeavor. Hardly anyone is interested in being force fed a narrative that suits the present power or the money interests."

Generally, in modern English programs, students are taught only to critique, tear down, or see through the texts—mostly using political lenses—not to appreciate them, learn from them, or create through them. They're not even taught how to solve the alleged cultural and economic problems portrayed in the literature they're criticizing.

The modern critical method, based on a spirit of “suspicion” toward the texts at hand and preoccupied with political agendas, shortchanges what literature is about, as literary critic Rita Felski argues in her book “The Limits of Critique.” This approach ignores literature’s power to move and inspire, to convey truth, beauty, and goodness. Ms. Felski rightly questions why we can’t read literature from a standpoint of appreciation and delight, rather than suspicion and criticism. Instead of delight, modern methods focus only on revealing the hidden sinister motives and systems of oppression within a text, a la Freud or Marx. Most kids got into literature because they loved language, stories, and characters—not because they hated capitalism. Yet the focus in college is often on the latter. The focus is disenchantment, not enchantment. This is perhaps the most significant reason these programs are failing.

One data point in confirmation of that assertion can be found toward the end of Mr. Heller’s piece. Robert Faggen, a professor at Claremont McKenna, told Mr. Heller that he still sees a healthy enrollment in his courses. This may be because he maintains wonder in his classes, taking a more old-fashioned approach, eschewing the worn out, esoteric theories of 20th-century Marxist scholars.

Mr. Faggen asserts: “We are very concerned with the beauty of things, with aesthetics, and ultimately with judgment about the value of works of art. I think there *is* a hunger among students for the thrill that comes from truth and beauty.”

It seems that Mr. Faggen’s approach needs to be adopted more widely, for hunger there is indeed, and the current model of humanities is bankrupt in more ways than one. Universities must change. Soon. For a future without the humanities is, precisely, a dehumanized one.

Mr. Heller observes, “American scholars ... have begun to wonder what it might mean to graduate a college generation with less education in the human past than any that has come before.”

With interest in the humanities vanishing like yesterday’s social media posts, we’re losing cultural knowledge, heritage, and an understanding of the wisdom of the past about the things that matter most: family, friendship, war, peace, justice, sacrifice, love, death, and God. In a word, we’re losing humanity.

Still, if there’s one thing the old books and paintings teach us, it’s not to despair. The hour may be late, the day declining fast in a swath of evening shadow, but history and literature and art reveal that the good in this world will endure, however precariously.

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