

Humanities Education

Are humanities degrees worth the cost?

A recent American Academy of Arts & Sciences report declared that dwindling support for the humanities could cripple U.S. commercial innovation and erode civic engagement. Although the number of Americans with degrees in the humanities, such as history and English, is at a record high, the proportion of those majoring in the humanities has been declining, as students increasingly choose career-focused majors such as nursing and engineering. New data show that humanities majors earn less in their first jobs than career-specific majors. Florida's governor has proposed trimming state tuition for students in majors with strong job prospects while allowing tuition to rise for humanities students. A House panel wants to slash funding for humanities research and education. Meanwhile, the new revelations about humanities graduates' earnings give liberal arts colleges reason to worry about a White House proposal to rate colleges based partly on graduates' salaries.



Humanities students such as filmmaker Brian Schwarz of the University of Texas-Austin are on the decline in the United States, as economic concerns prompt students increasingly to choose career-focused majors such as engineering. Schwarz, seen here in Beverly Hills, Calif., won a student Academy Award for his film "Ol' Daddy," about a young man who cares for his ailing father.

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Humanities Education

BY MARCIA CLEMMITT

THE ISSUES

John Davies, a 2008 Harvard University graduate in English literature, holds one of the hottest new business titles around: “data scientist.” He ferrets out meaningful patterns in large collections of statistical information for the New York City-based education-technology company Knewton.

Davies finds his English major “directly relevant to his job,” says José Ferreira, CEO of the company, which develops online-learning technology. “I wrote my thesis on [English poet John Milton’s epic poem] ‘Paradise Lost,’” said Davies. “One crucial skill I developed while studying literature . . . was extracting structure from complicated systems. And that’s exactly what I do here.”¹

But support for the humanities — studies such as English, history and philosophy — is under pressure on campuses, in government and in the job market. Recent data on graduates’ first salaries show that humanities majors — and even those with non-career-focused science majors, such as biology — earn far less than those with career-oriented degrees in subjects such as business and engineering.

In this period of government belt-tightening, some officials want to diminish support for humanities education. For example, Florida Republican Gov. Rick Scott has proposed trimming state college and university tuition for students in career-oriented majors while allowing it to rise for humanities students. In Congress, the House Appropriations Committee — controlled by Republicans seeking to reduce fed-



Getty Images/David McNew

Demonstrators in Los Angeles protest the rising cost of student loans on Sept. 22, 2012. Citing the government’s efforts to bail out struggling banks, protesters called for cancellation of student debt. The rising cost of a university degree is leading more students to eschew the humanities for more career-oriented majors.

eral debt — proposes cutting nearly 50 percent — about \$71 million — next year from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which awards education and research grants.²

Humanities advocates worry about the social and civic consequences of such actions. “At the very moment when China and some European nations are seeking to replicate our model of broad education in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences — as a stimulus to innovation and a source of social cohesion — we are instead narrowing our focus and abandoning our sense of what education has been and should continue to be — our

sense of what makes America great,” declared an American Academy of Arts & Sciences (AAAS) panel that studied the issue this year at the request of Congress.³

The panel, composed of scholars, university presidents, businesses executives and others, also cited what it said are troubling signs of weak public support for general literacy. For example, it said, parents read to their young children less often than they did a few decades ago, and only 30 percent of public high-school students are taught by a history teacher with a degree and certification in the subject.⁴

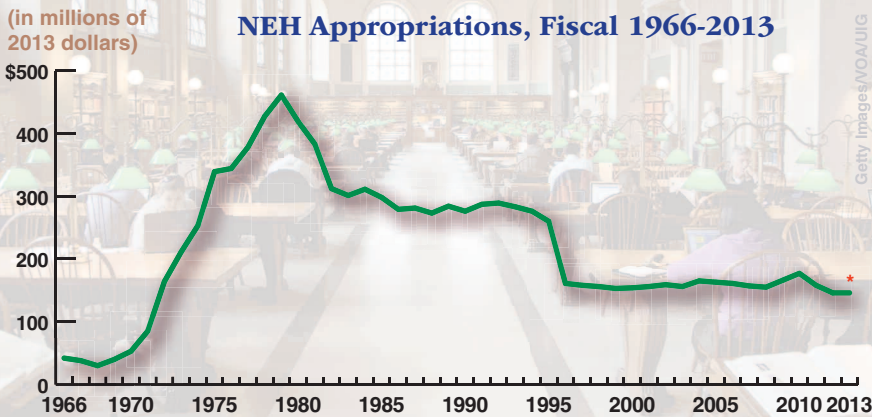
Martha Nussbaum, a professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, dubs what she calls a decline in public support for the humanities a “silent crisis” and argues that the very “future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance” if nations don’t prioritize the general learning and higher-order thinking humanities education encourages. Downplaying the

importance of the liberal arts* means “heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive,”

* The terms “humanities” and “liberal arts” are sometimes used interchangeably. However, “liberal arts” generally refers to a broad category of studies intended to provide general knowledge and develop intellectual capacities rather than specific, technical professional skills. A liberal arts curriculum includes studies of the humanities as well as basic or introductory courses in mathematics and science. The humanities include studies of areas of human endeavor, such as history, language, literature, philosophy, religion, visual and performing arts, as well as the social sciences (anthropology, area studies, communications, cultural studies, law and linguistics).

Funding for Humanities Research Peaked in 1979

Federal funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which provides grants for humanities research, peaked at \$461 million in 1979, dropped to less than \$200 million by the mid-1990s, and now totals less than \$150 million. A House panel has suggested cutting the funding nearly in half in fiscal 2014.



* 2013 figure does not reflect the cuts imposed by sequestration.

Source: "Humanities Indicators, 2013" American Academy of Arts & Sciences, www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=IV-1a.jpg&o=hrcoIVA.aspx_topIV1

she argues. If that's done on a large scale, nations may produce "generations of useful machines rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements."⁵

Educational theorists and politicians have debated the relative merits of career-specific training versus liberal arts education many times. Driving today's debate, however, is money, most analysts say.

Since the economic crisis that began in 2007, governments, colleges and families are strapped for cash, says Paul Jay, a professor of English at Loyola University Chicago. "Parents and students are concerned about jobs," he says. "Hard choices have to be made about resources." Likewise, universities — some struggling financially — must weigh which academic departments to support most generously, he says.

Yet, Jay says, even though he sympathizes with students' and families' money worries, "it's nutty, short-sighted and educationally irresponsible" for officials in Congress or the states to propose prioritizing career-oriented education over liberal education.

Rapidly rising college debt, which now tops \$1 trillion, fuels much of students' anxiety over what academic courses to pursue. Student loans cannot be discharged in bankruptcy, and among students with the highest debt levels of \$40,000 or more, 81 percent have private loans, with interest rates of 8 percent or higher.⁶ Humanities and liberal arts grads are at a clear disadvantage when it comes to earning salaries sufficient to pay off such mountainous debt, recent data show.⁷

For example, an analysis of Texas degree and certificate earners demonstrates that even two-year technical-oriented associate degree programs in

fields such as chemical technology and dental hygiene boost students' earning power far beyond that of students with bachelor's degrees in humanities disciplines such as psychology and history, according to Rockville, Md.-based College Measures. The research organization, a collaboration between the nonprofit American Institutes for Research and the for-profit consultancy Matrix Knowledge Group, produces data to inform education-related decision making.

On average, Texas students with two-year technical degrees had first-year median earnings exceeding \$50,000 — more than \$11,000 higher than graduates with bachelor's degrees, says College Measures.⁸

Some analysts question whether public support for the humanities — through student aid, state-run universities and research grants — is a wise use of taxpayer dollars.

"If you have highly trained engineers, they'll invent stuff" that drives business creation and employment, says College Measures President Mark Schneider. But "higher education is a highly subsidized enterprise," so it's completely appropriate — indeed, necessary — to ask, "How much societal resources should be invested in creating history majors?"

In August, the White House jumped into the fray, when President Obama suggested that Congress link schools' eligibility for federal student aid to measures of colleges' effectiveness, such as graduation rates, tuition affordability and graduates' salaries.⁹ Proponents of liberal arts and the humanities worry that such a plan would turn students away from majoring in the humanities.

"It is simplistic, and ultimately mischievous, to suggest that students should choose their major on the basis of 'graduate earnings,'" said Sanford Ungar, president of Goucher College, a liberal arts school in Towson, Md. "There is no way to put a precise monetary

value on different types of learning, and even if we do, the calculations will inevitably change over time.”¹⁰

Unlike data-driven science, humanities studies often involve open-ended questioning on potentially disturbing subjects, which leads some lawmakers to recommend spending tax dollars elsewhere.

In October, Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, the senior Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, demanded that NEH Chairman Carol Watson justify \$25,000 grants the agency awards for research and teaching related to philosophical questions such as, “What is the meaning of life?” and “What is the good life and how do I live it?” Using taxpayer dollars to fund education on questions that are “very indefinite” doesn’t suggest that NEH spending is “wise,” Sessions wrote.¹¹

Despite lawmakers’ disparagement and alarms raised by the AAAS report, however, “in some sense, you can’t kill the humanities,” says Christopher Nelson, president of St. John’s College, in Annapolis, Md., where students take a four-year, broad-based liberal-arts-and-science curriculum with no electives and no majors. “As long as there are human beings . . . there will be humanities, because humans will always want to understand themselves and the things that make us human; who a person is . . . ; what a good society is; what the body is; what the Earth is. . . . These questions will always be of interest.”

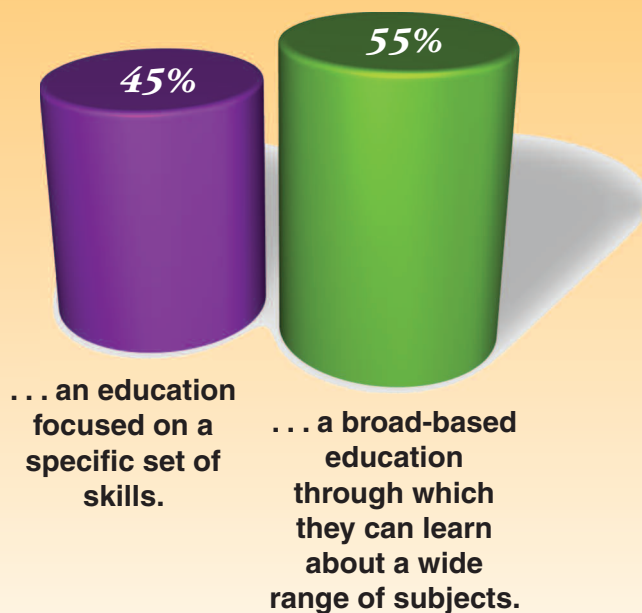
In addition, although some recent news reports have cited large drop-offs in the percentage of humanities majors, the percentages are not much lower than the average over the past 65 years, except for a hard-to-explain surge in the late 1960s, says Benjamin Schmidt, an assistant professor of history at Northeastern University in Boston. And when the increase in the total number of college students is taken into account, the actual number of humanities majors is greater than ever, Schmidt notes.

Employers Favor Broad-Based Education

In a survey of more than 1,000 hiring managers, most said students were better prepared for the job market by receiving a broad-based education rather than one focusing on specific career skills.

Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

“Most students would be better served by pursuing . . .”



Source: “Key Findings from a Survey of Hiring Decision Makers,” Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools/FTI Consulting, Dec. 5, 2011, p. 19, www.acics.org/events/content.aspx?id=4718

The relatively low starting salaries offered to liberal arts majors suggest to some that public support for humanities’ workplace usefulness is declining, but some employer surveys suggest the opposite. In a 2011 survey of hiring managers, 55 percent agreed with the statement: “Most students would be better served by pursuing a broad-based education through which they can learn about a wide range of subjects, giving them a diverse knowledge base.” And 45 percent agreed that, “most students would be better served by pursuing an education focused on a specific set of skills that will allow them to learn about one area in greater detail, . . .

preparing them for the workplace.”¹² (See graphic, above.)

Meanwhile, many academics say job-market arguments miss an important — perhaps the main — point: that studying the humanities enriches people’s personal lives and the nation’s intellectual life.

Some doubt that low-income students, especially, have time for humanities courses as they seek career credentials. But such students can benefit from the liberal arts, says David Berry, a history professor at Essex County College, in Newark, N.J., who was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 1997 for fostering humanities study in community colleges.

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Computers Breathe New Life into the Humanities

"It allows you to ask new questions."

In 1949, the Rev. Roberto Busa, an Italian Jesuit priest, asked IBM if he could use the company's punch-card machines to create an alphabetical index of all of St. Thomas Aquinas' 10 million words of theological writings. IBM agreed, and three decades later Busa published the 56-volume *Index Thomisticus*, an aid in the interpretation of Aquinas' work, which is a cornerstone of the Catholic faith.¹

Yet, despite such feats of computer-based statistical analysis of texts, the term "digital humanities" is relatively new. As the world digitizes, many scholars have wondered whether a marriage of computing to disciplines such as literature, history, theology and philosophy might reignite interest in the humanities among students, funding agencies and the public.²

The most basic function, and the one whose utility is most obvious, is digitizing the world's knowledge archives — books, historical diaries, artwork, museum artifacts and a wide range of other material — and making them broadly accessible online.

Benjamin Schmidt, an assistant professor of history at Northeastern University, in Boston, sees a "real benefit" to putting an entire archive online, including original manuscripts, public documents, photos and maps. For example, he says, students can examine original source materials that don't exist in any single university library.

The amount of material that so far has become accessible online far exceeds early expectations, Schmidt says. Newspapers, census and immigration records, ships' logs and marriage and death certificates, long stored in dusty archives around the world, already are widely digitized, he notes. And, he says, "in 10 years we've gotten almost all the books from our libraries digitized, and nobody thought that was possible. Now the question is, What comes next?"

As a result of digitization, Schmidt says, an historian can view documents such as census records for many people who took part in an event, potentially "allowing us to see things that we couldn't see before" about how history unfolded. In the past, archivists may have carefully preserved public and private documents in paper form, but it was difficult and expensive for researchers to get to them. Now, digitized archival materials are "just waiting for their readers to come along," Schmidt says.

Some humanities scholars worry that the technical demands of learning advanced computation methods will drag researchers away from the real purpose of humanities study — to deepen understanding of the human experience.

David Golumbia, an assistant professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond, taught digital humanities at the University of Virginia in the early 2000s. "I found that I was not teaching English," he said. "I was told to teach how to build websites instead of reading books and talking about them."³

But other scholars say computers' ability to create and manipulate ultra-detailed graphic representations of data and virtual environments make humanities study easier.

Katherine Rowe, a professor of English at Bryn Mawr College, near Philadelphia, used a virtual three-dimensional theater to help students visualize how different ways of blocking out a scene from a Shakespeare play onstage could affect an audience. Being able to easily move characters around in the virtual space fired students' imaginations and led to more insights than classes had achieved when they tried the same assignment in an actual theater, Rowe said.⁴

And digital humanities have the potential to do more than make familiar kinds of analysis faster or more effective, says David Staley, a professor of history and design at Ohio State University, in Columbus. They may also open doors to entirely new ways of thinking. "To get a sense of what digital humanities is, ask of the technology, 'What does this allow me to do that the page doesn't?' " he says.

A key route to new forms of thinking in the humanities is the ability of computers to create multidimensional visualizations, even in forms that are animated or that give the illusion of movement through time, according to Staley. Scientists and mathematicians have long used visualization to think through complex problems, as Einstein did in apprehending the theory of relativity by visualizing himself riding on a beam of light. But in the past, humanities scholars have relied almost entirely on words as tools of exploration, Staley says.

Some visualization techniques already are in use. Using information about how the geography of the Civil War battlefield at Gettysburg, Pa., has changed over time, historians have created a virtual representation of the area as it was when the Confederacy suffered its disastrous defeat there. Computer programs can determine what the Confederate generals could actually see from their stations, for example, shedding light on why they made some ill-fated tactical decisions.⁵

David Bodenhamer, an Indiana University historian, said linking digitized spatial information to historical events "allows you to ask new questions: Why is it that something developed here and not somewhere else? What is it about the context of this place?"⁶

— Marcia Clemmitt

¹ Meredith Hindley, "The Rise of the Machines," *Humanities*, July/August 2013, www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/julyaugust/feature/the-rise-the-machines.

² For background, see Tom Price, "Crunching Data Sheds New Light on History," p. 920, in "Big Data and Privacy," *CQ Researcher*, Oct. 25, 2013, pp. 909-932.

³ Quoted in James Goodman, "At RIT, Analog Subjects Go Digital," *Rochester [New York] Democrat and Chronicle*, March 20, 2013, p. A1.

⁴ See Patricia Cohen, "Giving Literature Virtual Life," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/03/22/books/digital-humanities-boots-up-on-some-campuses.html?ref=humanities20&_r=0.

⁵ Patricia Cohen, "Digital Maps Are Giving Scholars the Historical Lay of the Land," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/07/27/arts/geo-graphic-information-systems-help-scholars-see-history.html?ref=humanities20.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*

Continued from p. 1033

“As Socrates said, ‘The unexamined life isn’t worth living.’ When you can provide ways for students to connect their lives” to philosophical and literary works and to history, “they’re all capable of deep reflection that can be especially important to students who have to overcome personal problems,” including poverty, says Berry.

Over the years, many Essex County students have earned two-year, job-oriented degrees but then gone on to study for bachelor’s degrees while working, Berry says. “We would never want to dead-end students” by not helping them obtain prerequisites for studying noncareer-focused subjects at four-year colleges. “That would be a horrible, cynical way of looking at students,” he says.

As students and parents try to decide which majors are worth their cost and Congress debates further defunding of humanities studies, here are some questions being debated:

Is a humanities degree worth its cost and effort?

Because humanities majors begin their working lives earning far lower salaries, on average, than graduates with engineering, business and other technical career-oriented majors, many graduates and their parents wonder if a humanities education is worth today’s rapidly rising tuitions.

“The highest-paid U.S. degrees go to people who can do something, make something,” such as those who have studied skills related to high-tech manufacturing, accounting and health care, says College Measures President Schneider. Humanities and social science degrees lead to far lower salaries than most vocational-skills credentials, but “the ‘S’ in ‘STEM’ ” — the acronym for science, technology, engineering and math — “is also highly overrated,” he says. “Biology is the biggest major there, and they don’t earn anything within hailing distance of engineers.”

Ten Ways to Build Support for the Humanities

The American Academy of Arts & Sciences warns in its 2013 report, “The Heart of the Matter,” that dwindling support for the humanities could cripple commercial innovation and erode civic engagement. The report recommends a variety of public policy measures designed to build support, including the following:

- Supporting literacy education — including reading, writing, speaking and analytical thinking — for preschool through adult learners.
- Investing in civics education.
- Building public-private partnerships through museums and libraries to engage the public in humanities- and social science-related activities.
- Increasing research funding through the National Endowment for the Humanities.
- Creating cohesive K-12 curricula designed to develop problem solving, critical analysis and communication skills.
- Strengthening support for humanities teachers with a Master Teacher Corps, continuing education and loan forgiveness for advanced-degree holders who teach K-12.
- Encouraging humanities and social science scholars to join scientists in addressing the major global challenges such as the need for energy, clean air and water, food, health care and universal education.
- Informing the public about interesting, real-world implications of humanities and social science research.
- Supporting study abroad and international exchange programs.
- Creating a volunteer Culture Corps of retirees and others to share their humanities and social-science expertise with young people.

Source: “The Heart of the Matter,” American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2013, www.humanitiescommission.org/_pdf/hss_report.pdf

In Texas, for example, biology bachelor’s degree holders earn an average of \$26,430 in their first working year, while newly minted mechanical engineers with bachelor’s degrees earn \$74,818.¹³

“Most young people in college take whatever interests them, without thinking what it can really do for them,” said Anthony Carnevale, director of the Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) at Georgetown University, in Washington. However, he points out, “What society rewards in economic terms has moved away from the softer majors. It’s become about how much math you do.”

CEW finds high jobless rates for 22- to 26-year-old graduates with majors in

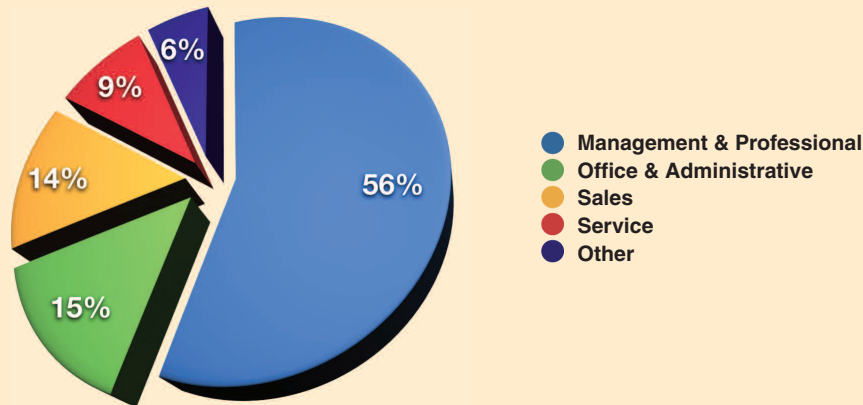
the arts (11.1 percent); humanities and liberal arts (9.4 percent); social sciences (8.9 percent); and law and public policy (8.1 percent). Young nursing graduates, by contrast, have an unemployment rate of only 4 percent.¹⁴

Other analysts, however, insist that focusing on early-career salary comparisons ignores the intangible value of job satisfaction as well as the hard-to-quantify abilities that humanities majors impart, such as writing and speaking skills. “I worry about the first-generation college students who hear the alarms about unemployment rates among humanities majors,” says Debra Humphreys, vice president for policy and public engagement at the American Association

Humanities Majors Work in Variety of Fields

College graduates with humanities degrees are more widely distributed throughout different economic sectors than degree holders in most other fields, according to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Types of Jobs Held by Humanities Graduates, 2013



Source: "Humanities Report Card 2013," American Academy of Arts & Sciences, www.humanitiesindicators.org/downloadFigures.aspx

of Colleges and Universities (AACU). Such alarm might lead some to prematurely dismiss the idea of a humanities major, she says, even though it might be their best course of study.

The humanities teach transferable skills that can pay career dividends down the line, Humphreys says. Many jobs that today's undergraduates will hold "don't even exist yet," she says, and "communication and being able to analyze problems is sometimes the most important aspect of a job," especially as careers advance. Furthermore, she says, an ongoing AACU examination of later-career salaries suggests that many liberal arts majors catch up to technical-degree grads. An exception is engineering graduates, who maintain their salary advantage for life.

Stanton Green, dean of the school of humanities and social sciences at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, N.J., agrees many employers value the skills humanities disciplines impart. A bank president who had hired numerous Monmouth graduates told university officials "the most suc-

cessful of our students were . . . theater majors," Green said. Their work at the bank stood out because of "exactly those abilities that liberal arts students acquire: They can read, write, converse, make presentations to groups, work in teams."¹⁵

Michael Brenner, an emeritus professor of international affairs at the University of Pittsburgh, says, "As a society, we've gradually seen money become the measure of all things, with a total disregard of other things such as job satisfaction and the ability to function well as a citizen. It's unrealistic to think that everybody's going to . . . make a fortune," so encouraging students to turn away from studies that traditionally have given people "more fruitful and satisfying lives" makes little sense, he says.

Should all students be required to take certain humanities courses?

Through the 19th and into the early 20th century, many U.S. colleges required all students to complete a pre-

scribed set of liberal arts courses in several disciplines. Indeed, requiring such courses for all was a hallmark of American education, setting it apart from the career-focused approach of European and Asian schools. Typical "general education" requirements included humanities classes such as historical surveys of poetry or foreign language courses as well as classes that introduced students to mathematical methods of thinking or taught the basics of a science such as chemistry.

Some faculties even collaboratively developed lists of "core" texts that all students must read — typically Shakespeare's plays or the *Federalist Papers* — although in later decades core-text classes increasingly were replaced by courses on key transferable skills, such as oral discussion and written analysis.

Today, educators continue to debate whether general liberal arts courses should be required for all.

Students inevitably lack motivation when they are required to take a course and thus get little out of mandatory classes, wrote Ethan Tobias, a 2012 graduate of Brown University, in Providence, R.I., which has no course requirements. "Choice is a very powerful psychological weapon," he said. "Tell a child to clean his room, and he will probably refuse or do so grudgingly, but let him decide what to do about the mess, and . . . he still might not clean it . . . However, if he does . . . , it will be on his terms and with much greater enthusiasm."¹⁶

As tuitions rise, more students may chafe at course requirements that don't directly mesh with their career goals, wrote Yusuf Rabanni, a student at Valparaiso University in northwestern Indiana. "Without the required courses, students majoring in some fields, such as English, for example, could graduate in a matter of two years," saving time and \$40,000 in tuition, he wrote.¹⁷

The humanities are "central to learning and life," but when it comes to prescribing specific courses to all

students, it's a more complicated question, says David Staley, a professor of design and history at Ohio State University in Columbus. "The needs of students are so varied that it's difficult to impose a unified standard," he says. "We talk about a postsecondary education system, but I don't know that you can call it a system. There's everything from the Institute for Advanced Study to beauty colleges, and we have 4,000 schools. They draw students with different needs, different desires. And that makes it difficult to say, 'Students need x.'"

Some commentators say, however, that there are plenty of reasons for course requirements in humanities and liberal arts.

Though many colleges have eliminated requirements, doing so has merely been a marketing tactic to win over teenagers, charged Victor Ferrall Jr., a lawyer and former president of Beloit College, in Beloit, Wis., and author of the 2011 book *Liberal Arts at the Brink*. The result has been to turn over curriculum design "to students who by definition are not yet liberally educated" and therefore have no idea how to put together a sequence of courses that will give them a broad and solid basis for future learning, Ferrall said.¹⁸

"I've gotten really pragmatic in my arguments" for studying subjects that don't relate to one's career interests, says Jeffrey Davis, an associate professor of English at Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian liberal arts school in Wheaton, Ill. "There are 168 hours in a week, and only 90 go to work and sleep. If your education speaks only to your career and not to the bulk of the hours when you're awake, of how much value is it to you" as a citizen and an individual?

Humanities disciplines such as philosophy and literature concern themselves with matters of life and death, good and evil — and thus raise questions that "everyone . . . in the room has access to, simply by virtue of being



Getty Images/The Washington Post/Jay Paul

Nursing student Michael Swanberg is among 1,500 students and faculty who protested the abrupt ouster in June 2012 of University of Virginia President Teresa Sullivan by UVA's Board of Visitors. Sullivan had proposed ways to improve the university's strained finances while maintaining its commitment to humanities and liberal arts education, a plan that reportedly precipitated the board's action. After a massive student and faculty outcry, the board reinstated Sullivan.

human," said Victoria Mora, vice president for advancement at the Santa Fe, N.M., campus of St. John's College. That fact alone makes humanities classes an important prerequisite for studying all other disciplines, including math and science, because they ease students into the important intellectual discipline of engaging actively and personally with academic material, said Mora.

In humanities courses, "even when young adults are faced with daunting works and big ideas . . . they just can't seem to help asking their own questions," Mora said. Because of that practice, St. John's students, many of whom start out somewhat leery of the school's heavy math and science requirements, "get past these inhibitions and . . . find that they have questions for the likes of Euclid, Ptolemy, Newton and Einstein," Mora said.¹⁹

Should humanities majors receive less tuition support than students earning career-focused degrees?

Since the recession began reducing government tax revenues, many state

legislatures have been cutting spending for public colleges and universities, even as they have pushed the schools to do more to help rebuild state economies.

Late last year, a Florida task force broke new ground by suggesting that schools keep tuitions at current rates for three years for students majoring in career-focused technical fields that are in high demand by employers, while raising them for those majoring in humanities and social sciences. Allowing tuitions to rise for low-demand majors would encourage students and schools to focus on economy-enhancing career preparation while easing at least a bit of the burden on taxpayers, said the group.

It's unclear whether Florida will put such a policy in place. But the proposal fueled nationwide debate over whether funding liberal arts majors and technical majors at different levels is fair or effective in boosting the economy. "If I'm going to take money from a citizen to put it into education, then I'm going to take that money to

create jobs,” Gov. Scott said. “Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don’t think so.”²⁰

Ninety-percent of U.S.-born founders of engineering and tech companies active from 1995 to 2005 earned their highest degrees in STEM, business, economics, law or health care, according to a survey by the entrepreneurship-focused Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, Mo. Only 3 percent held their final degrees in the arts, humanities or social sciences.²¹

This statistic proves the high value to the economy of technical, career-focused degrees, which humanities degrees cannot match, wrote Edward Conard, a visiting scholar at the free market-oriented American Enterprise Institute think tank in Washington. “It’s true some advanced degree holders may have earned undergraduate degrees in humanities, but they quickly learned humanities degrees alone offered inadequate training, and they returned to school,” he wrote in a commentary titled, “We Don’t Need More Humanities Majors.”²²

Other commentators, however, argue that liberal arts degrees also serve the public interest and, in any case, subsidizing more STEM majors probably would not produce more scientists.

Students are not avoiding scientific fields because of high tuition but because many are inadequately prepared to study those fields, said Sherman Dorn, a professor of education at the University of South Florida. “How many undergraduates in Florida start out wanting to be doctors . . . until they hit calculus and organic chemistry?”²³

Furthermore, the number of humanities majors in Florida is already low, he said. English and fine arts each accounts for fewer than 5 percent of undergraduate majors in Florida, and history, foreign languages, philosophy and area studies — interdisciplinary majors involving study of various aspects

of the history and civilization of a country, culture or region — each accounts for 2 percent or less. That being the case, “you cannot dramatically boost physics enrollment by stealing from philosophy,” he said. “But you can ruin a philosophy program.”²⁴

“STEM skills are immediately and transparently applicable to a number of tasks when one enters the workforce,” wrote Ferreira, at the technology startup Knewton and a philosophy major. This simple correlation between skills and on-the-job duties is partly why STEM is held to be much more economically valuable than the humanities, he added. Nevertheless, “it is very difficult in most organizations to advance beyond a certain point without strong communication skills” and the “critical thinking skills and learning about other cultures and ideas” that are fostered by the liberal arts and increasingly are important in a global knowledge economy.²⁵

The value of humanities to society goes far beyond a simple calculation of job-market rewards, many humanities advocates argue. Working in international affairs, for example, requires knowing “a lot about . . . the world: [about] customs, culture and language,” said retired Army Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, a former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan who is a lecturer at Stanford University’s Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. “Study of the humanities and social sciences is absolutely critical, not only as it applies to foreign studies, but also to knowing something about ourselves.”²⁶

“People as individuals mostly do understand the value of humanities” for society, but a disconnect occurs when issues of public funding come up, says Berry, of Essex County College. For example, he continues, people often “talk about wanting an electorate that’s more deeply informed about [policy and political] issues. That’s what the humanities are about!” ■

BACKGROUND

Reading the Classics

Debates over the proper place of humanities, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and career-skills courses in education are not new. All three curriculum areas were discussed in one of Western philosophy’s founding documents — the Greek philosopher Plato’s masterwork, *The Republic*, written nearly 2,400 years ago. After two millennia of discussion, however, debates about the relative value of the big-three curriculum areas continue, as lively as ever.

In the West, the idea of formal schooling as the backbone of civilized society began with the Greeks, around the fifth century B.C. In *The Republic*, the philosopher describes the schooling that educated citizens of his ideal republic would receive in terms that echo through the history of higher education.²⁷

After completing elementary school, young men of Plato’s ideal republic’s ruling classes would study mathematical reasoning in the form of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music (included because harmonious music is produced by strings whose lengths form precise, small-number mathematical ratios). These four subjects — the ancient Greek equivalent of STEM — “lead toward truth,” Plato observed through his literary mouthpiece and real-life teacher, Socrates.²⁸

Nevertheless, the primary purpose of mathematics is as a stepping stone to a higher field of study — the arts of abstract reasoning and discussion, Plato said. Only these high-level and widely applicable skills — similar to the cornerstone humanities disciplines of philosophy and logic — would enable the republic’s leaders to grasp “by thought alone the real nature of good itself,” he wrote.²⁹

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Chronology

1960s *Percentage of humanities majors hits new high, but colleges begin dropping liberal arts requirements to attract students.*

1961

Soviets achieve first manned Earth orbit, prompting U.S. to boost investment in science education.

1963

In an early triumph for computerized humanities research, statisticians analyze word-usage patterns to determine that President James Madison is the likely author of several of the anonymously published *Federalist Papers*.

1964

Scholarly groups argue that emphasis on science education endangers the humanities and call for a new federal grantmaking agency. . . . Congress introduces legislation to implement the groups' recommendations.

1965

National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) is created to make research and education grants.

1966

Queens College, in New York City, publishes first issue of the journal *Computers and the Humanities*.

1967

A record 17 percent of bachelor's degrees go to humanities majors, up from about 10 percent in 1950.

1976

Percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded to humanities majors drops to 9.87 percent.

1984

NEH recommends colleges require all students to take European and American history and to study a non-Western culture.

1985

Percentage of bachelor's degrees in humanities drops to 6.43 percent.

1990s *Humanities majors increase slightly, as do liberal arts requirements, including at community colleges.*

1991

Of graduating humanities Ph.D.s, 60 percent have definite offers of employment, a percentage that drops to 47 percent by 2011.

1993

In a historical study of 50 of the most selective colleges, 4 percent require students to take a philosophy course, compared to 76 percent that did in 1914; 64 percent require foreign-language study, compared to 90 percent in 1964.

1999

Humanities faculty account for about 14 percent of the total faculty in postsecondary institutions, a percentage that remains largely unchanged through the mid-2000s.

2012

Florida state task force recommends that public colleges and universities lower tuitions for technical majors in high demand by employers while humanities and social science majors would pay higher tuitions. . . . In a national survey, the highest percentage ever — 81 percent — of entering college freshman said “being very well off financially” was an “essential” or “very important” personal goal. . . . Number of liberal arts colleges nationwide drops to 130, down from 212 in 1990.

2013

Congress prohibits National Science Foundation from funding political-science research not aimed at improving national security or the economy. . . . House appropriators propose 49 percent cuts in 2014 funding for NEH and the National Endowment for the Arts. . . . Congressionally requested report warns that waning government and public support for the humanities and social sciences may decrease voter participation and drain creativity from the workforce. . . . President Obama proposes linking federal student aid to college graduation rates, tuition affordability and graduates' salaries, beginning in 2018. . . . Data from five states on college graduates' first-job salaries show that technical majors earn most, followed by non-career-specific math and science majors; humanities and social science majors earn the least. . . . Chinese Ministry of Education announces plans to build 100 humanities and social science research centers and 20 social-science laboratories by 2015 to study issues related to economics, society, politics, diplomacy and law.

1970s-1980s *As college enrollments soar, humanities majors drop from record highs.*

2000s *Rising student debt and economic insecurity drive interest in career-oriented studies.*

Can the ‘Common Core’ Boost Humanities?

New academic standards in K-12 schools receive both praise and criticism.

“Robust teaching” of humanities in kindergarten through 12th grade may be the “most strategic investment” the United States can make to boost Americans’ literacy — a vital goal to ensure a sound political and economic future. So said a panel of experts commissioned by congressional Democrats and Republicans to assess the role of humanities and social science in the nation’s future.

In a report issued in June, the panel also expressed support for a controversial new set of nationally crafted K-12 academic standards, known as the Common Core State Standards Initiative, that most of the states are expected to adopt over the next few years. The standards, spearheaded by the National Governors Association, attempt to improve student preparation for college and careers and establish continuity of educational goals across all participating states by defining the English and math skills students should have at the end of each grade.¹

“We applaud the thinking behind” the standards, the panel of experts said. The Common Core “makes communication — reading, writing, and speaking — a fundamental element of education, opening doors for more advanced learning.”²

Yet plaudits for the Common Core are far from universal. While some educators believe the initiative can enhance students’ reading and writing skills, others argue that the standards — at least as likely to be implemented — will make the

curriculum shallower and less engaging. Many critics say the Common Core will deprive students of two of the most important aspects of humanities study — encountering great works of literary imagination and linking those works to personal experiences.

The standards mandate that schools spend at least half their reading-instruction time teaching students how to read nonfiction informational texts, such as “bulletins from the Federal Reserve, court decisions and computer manuals,” said Anthony Esolen, a professor of English at Providence College, in Rhode Island. The likely aim is to groom students as “players in a global economy,” a goal incongruent with both democratic ideals and the liberal arts, Esolen argued.³

Today many K-12 teachers spark engagement with assigned reading by asking students to reflect on how a book or poem relates to their personal lives. By contrast, the Common Core requires students to respond to readings by pointing out patterns, writing pieces similar in form to ones they have read and, especially, forming conclusions about readings and marshaling evidence to back them up.

But “students always rely on personal connections first,” said a teacher at a Common Core coaching session in New York City who questioned how assignments could be made “meaningful” to students.⁴

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Specific career-oriented professional skills such as navigation, carpentry, architecture, farming and medicine also were to be taught in Plato’s republic. However, no matter how highly trained such practical artisans became, they were barred from leadership roles. Those were reserved for upper-class men with philosophical training.

Other ancient Greek, as well as Roman, philosophers continued developing Plato’s vision of what came to be known as the “liberal arts” curriculum — studies intended to develop broad skills vital to functioning as a free citizen, such as analyzing and debating public issues.

During the early Christian era, liberal arts study formed the core curriculum in schools established across Europe by monks and nuns. It included a three-part, skills-focused humanities

portion — the so-called *trivium* of grammar, rhetoric and logic — and the four-part *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music.

“Those to whom the system of the *trivium* has disclosed the significance of all words . . . do not need the help of a teacher . . . to understand the meaning of books and to find the solutions of questions,” wrote 12th-century English educator and bishop John of Salisbury. Cultivation of these broadly applicable intellectual disciplines was well in line with Christian practice, since reason is not only the mother of knowledge but of virtue, he declared.³⁰

The term “humanities” — *studia humanitatis*, or “study of human things” — was first applied to the *trivium* in 15th-century Italy, where scholars added a new element: reading Greek and Roman books in their original languages. Meanwhile, liberal arts study was

still confined mainly to males in the ruling classes. Humanities study was deemed “unsuitable for women because it was intended to form the minds of civic and political leaders,” said Mary Ann Frese Witt, a professor emerita of foreign languages and literature at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.³¹

In the 17th and 18th centuries, colleges and schools sprang up in colonial America, with Harvard University established in 1636, Virginia’s College of William and Mary in 1693, and others to follow. Struggling to survive, the young colleges generally admitted any boy who could pay tuition, and few stayed to graduate. When the College of Rhode Island — now Brown University — opened in 1765, it had one student; in 1767, it had 10. Yale, founded in 1701, had awarded 18 degrees by 1707.

These colleges “ratified and perpetuated an elite that would inherit

Common Core advocates respond that reading fact-heavy nonfiction and engaging in analytical writing and discussion are crucial for college preparation.

Reading complex material, both literary and informational, requires practice in analytical skills, such as determining authors' purposes and understanding how they use language to convey their messages — activities mandated by the Common Core, said David Coleman, a chief architect of the standards and president of the College Board, an association of U.S. colleges that designs the SAT and AP tests.⁵

Reading informational texts and gaining the general knowledge they provide are necessary preludes to reading college-level texts in subjects such as history, said E. D. Hirsch Jr., a professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia.

"In 1978 . . . I realized that the community college students we were testing along with University of Virginia students could read just as well as anyone else when the topic was familiar — 'Why I don't like my roommate,' etc.," said Hirsch. "But their reading began to fall off drastically in passages about the Civil War, which they were not on familiar terms with."

Possessing background information a student could use to make sense of a new text "was the single most important variable in reading comprehension," he said.⁶

Nevertheless, Hirsch warns that continuing the current tradition of basing student and teacher evaluations on standardized tests could endanger the Common Core's promise, if "test-prep for reading-comprehension tests [usurps] the teaching of science, literature, history, civics, and the arts — the very subjects needed for good reading comprehension."⁷

— Marcia Clemmitt

¹ "Implementing the Common Core State Standards," Common Core State Standards Initiative, www.corestandards.org.

² "The Heart of the Matter," American Academy of Arts & Sciences, June 2013, www.humanitiescommission.org/_pdf/hss_report.pdf, p. 23.

³ Anthony Esolen, "Humanist, Where Art Thou?" *The Catholic Thing*, April 12, 2012, www.thecatholicthing.org/columns/2012/humanist-where-art-thou.html.

⁴ Quoted in Joy Resmovits, "Common Core Reading Survey Shows Slow Start to Teaching Shift," *The Huffington Post*, Oct. 23, 2013, www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/23/common-core-reading_n_4145323.html?utm_hp_ref=books&ir=Books.

⁵ Gillian Burdett, "Learning to Love Reading: NY Common Core Engages Students With Books," *Examiner.com*, April 17, 2012, www.examiner.com/article/learning-to-love-reading-ny-common-core-engages-students-books.

⁶ Quoted in Rebecca Rothbaum, "Q&A, E.D. Hirsch Jr., Founder, Core Knowledge Foundation," *Amplify* blog, Aug. 27, 2013, www.amplify.com/viewpoints/q-a-e-d-hirsch-jr.-founder-core-knowledge-foundation.

⁷ E. D. Hirsch Jr., "The Test of the Common Core," *The Huffington Post*, Aug. 28, 2013, www.huffingtonpost.com/e-d-hirsch-jr/common-core-tests_b_3824859.html?utm_hp_ref=@education123.

positions of influence in communities," wrote John Thelin, a professor at the University of Kentucky College of Education, in Lexington. At their core were the humanities, especially the skills of the *trivium* as applied to public speaking, a vital skill for both church and political leaders. A college education was not considered a prerequisite for professions such as law or medicine. In 1800 only about 0.6 percent of American males age 16 through 25 were in college.

Technology Rising

By the mid-19th century, "the argument was being made that the sciences will take us into the future," says Caroline Winterer, a professor of history and director of the Humanities Center at Stanford University, in Palo

Alto, Calif. "Suddenly the classics" — long considered the pinnacle of leadership education — "didn't seem so useful anymore."

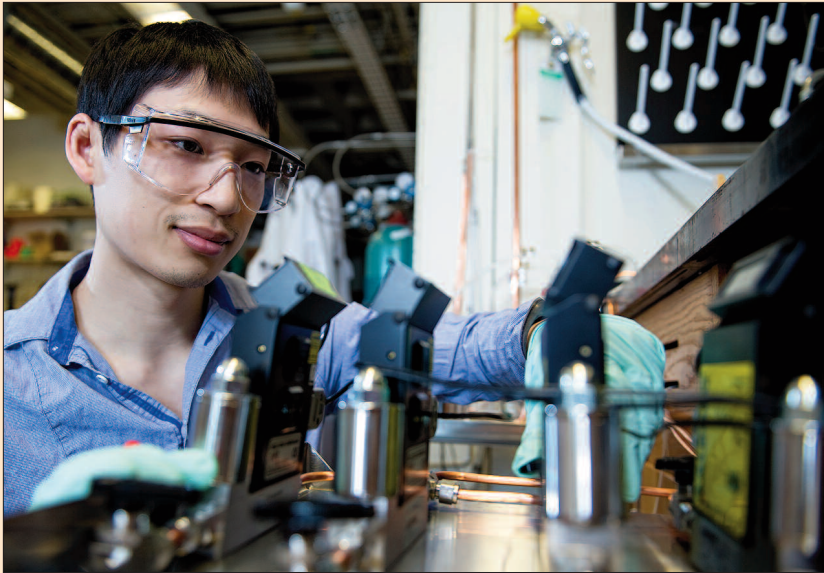
Colleges began adding humanities courses that promised more contemporary relevance, replacing the reading of Latin classics with study of literature originally written in English and other modern languages, for example.³² And in a bid to reassert their dominance, humanities scholars "began arguing that humanities serve a cause higher than utility because they address the soul," says Winterer. This tactic played into the hands of science faculty, however, who were "happy to agree that humanities had no utility," she quips.

The growing prestige of science also boosted what Plato had dubbed the practical arts — vocational studies — and spurred a new wave of college

construction. The Cincinnati College of Agriculture opened in 1851. Planning for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology began the same year. Existing colleges began adding technical classes.

Meanwhile, skilled workers as well as medical and other professionals were leery about colleges moving into career-oriented education. They feared that college degrees — still generally available only to the rich — might eventually become a prerequisite for careers such as law, surveying, medicine and mechanical engineering and for career training that members of the professions and skilled trades had formerly handled themselves.

Related questions of whether post-secondary education should reinforce or help bypass barriers of class, wealth and race played into the post-Civil-War founding of colleges for freed blacks across the South. Established



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Getty Images/Hiroiyuki Ito

Two Academic Choices

New data show that humanities majors earn less in their first jobs than career-specific majors. Graduate researcher Steven Shimizu of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is among the increasing number of students who choose career-focused majors such as engineering. He is working with a furnace that produces carbon nanotubes for experimental use (top). Jazz composer Vijay Iyer's Large Ensemble Project performs at Montclair State University in New Jersey on Oct. 4, 2013. Iyer recently was awarded a \$625,000 MacArthur "Genius" Award, indicating that choosing to major in the humanities or liberal arts also can be rewarding.

mainly by Northern philanthropists, these new colleges primarily turned out to be "segregated black institutes . . . whose curricula offered preparation for skilled crafts and trades," wrote

the University of Kentucky's Thelin. The anti-egalitarian result: "Black higher education was not preparing alumni for . . . fields associated with leadership and genuine power."³³

Business Influence

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American philanthropists poured huge sums into college and university coffers. Ironically, though, many industrialists donating the cash were neither college educated nor, it seems, terribly impressed with still mainly liberal-arts-focused colleges.

Said Clarence Birdseye, an inventor and the founder of the Birds Eye frozen-food brand: "Our colleges have become a part of the business and commercial machinery of our country, and must therefore be measured by somewhat the same standard." But liberal-arts education, Birdseye grouched, rendered most graduates unfit for business.³⁴

Well into the 20th century, however, most American colleges offered broad liberal arts education through survey courses and other classes aimed at acquainting freshman and sophomores, especially, with the basics of disciplines such as philosophy and history. Furthermore, U.S. elementary and secondary schools provided "a very good public education that belonged to everybody," focused on humanities disciplines such as civics, history and grammar, says Matthew Santirocco, a professor of classics and senior vice provost for undergraduate academic affairs at New York University, in New York City.

The 20th century brought changes that diminished the dominance of liberal arts in college curricula.

Graduate school became a prerequisite for college teaching, and professors became specialists who preferred to teach their specialized research rather than more general subject matter. In fact, "graduate schools are antithetical to liberal education," because they "reward narrowness, not breadth," argued former Beloit College President Ferrall.³⁵

Meanwhile, much as Birdseye may have hoped, colleges and universities took on more of the structure of businesses,

employing more top- and mid-level managers such as vice presidents and deans, and filling their governing boards with business executives and financiers.

Over the past 40 years, governing boards dominated by CEOs and hedge-fund managers “with a bottom-line mentality” have “steadily but relentlessly” displaced faculty from decision-making, including about curriculum, says Jay of Loyola University Chicago.

In some cases, the bottom-line approach has clashed with support for liberal arts and humanities. In early June 2012, the University of Virginia’s (UVA) Board of Visitors, led by real estate developer Helen Dragas, abruptly ousted university President Teresa Sullivan, a sociologist. Sullivan was reinstated less than three weeks later after a high-profile revolt by faculty.³⁶

In a May 2012 analysis, Sullivan had acknowledged that UVA’s commitment to humanities and liberal arts education posed dilemmas. “Some . . . fields that bring us the greatest distinction are not those in which most people would today invest (e.g., Spanish, English, religious studies),” and hiring faculty can be difficult because while “every institution says that it prizes teaching, . . . the University really does,” she wrote. Rather than suggesting that the university jettison its priorities, however, Sullivan proposed ways to improve finances while maintaining UVA’s commitment to humanities and liberal arts, a plan that may have precipitated the board’s initial decision to replace her.³⁷

The conservative editorial board of the business-oriented *Wall Street Journal* accused the professors who fought to get Sullivan reinstated of trying to create an “academic Green Zone separated from economic reality.”³⁸

Meanwhile, the past century has seen exponential expansion in the percentage of people seeking higher education, a trend that has boosted interest in a broad variety of majors, including career-oriented disciplines. In 1900, only one in 400 — 0.25 percent

of Americans, primarily the economic elite — attended college.³⁹ By 2011, 42 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in either a two- or four-year college.⁴⁰

Changing Curricula

Given the pace of social change, it’s little wonder that college curricula have changed over a century. Whether those changes constitute a crisis for humanities is less clear, however.

Some data do indicate a long-term decline in interest and support. So-called liberal arts colleges — which do not offer graduate degrees or career-oriented majors, have substantial humanities and other general-education requirements and feature small classes and high student engagement — have steadily declined in numbers, from 212 in 1990 to 130 in 2012.⁴¹

In addition, a prominent mid-1990s study found that during the 20th century, liberal arts requirements decreased substantially at 50 of the nation’s most selective colleges. In 1914, for example, 76 percent of schools required at least one philosophy course, but in 1996 only 4 percent did. And while 90 percent of the schools had a foreign language requirement in 1964, only 64 percent did by 1993.⁴²

Nevertheless, “the data are mixed. We don’t know that it merits being called a ‘crisis,’” says Santirocco of New York University. For one thing, over the past two decades, many schools have recommitted themselves to “robust core” and “humanities-infused” curricula, he says.

In 2005, for example, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) launched its Liberal Education for American Progress (LEAP) initiative to challenge the practice “of providing liberal education to some students and narrow training to others.” To date, nine state college systems and some 340 schools have joined the initiative to offer broad-based lib-

eral arts-style intellectual training to all students, the AACU says.⁴³

Today, while the percentage of students majoring in humanities has dropped, it remains close to the average level of the past 65 years or so.⁴⁴ Furthermore, because the number of Americans earning college degrees soared over the same period, the proportion of the population with humanities degrees has remained about the same, even after the collapse of the temporary bubble in humanities majors that occurred in the late 1960s, according to journalist and statistical analyst Nate Silver, of the *Five Thirty Eight* blog.

In 1971, only 26.7 percent of 21-year-olds earned bachelor’s degrees, while by 2011 43.4 percent did. Thus, even though the percentage of graduates who were English majors, for example, dropped from a high of 7.6 percent to 3.1 percent, the percentage of the U.S. population holding English degrees remained close to the same level it was in the bubble years, Silver said.⁴⁵ ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Congress at Odds?

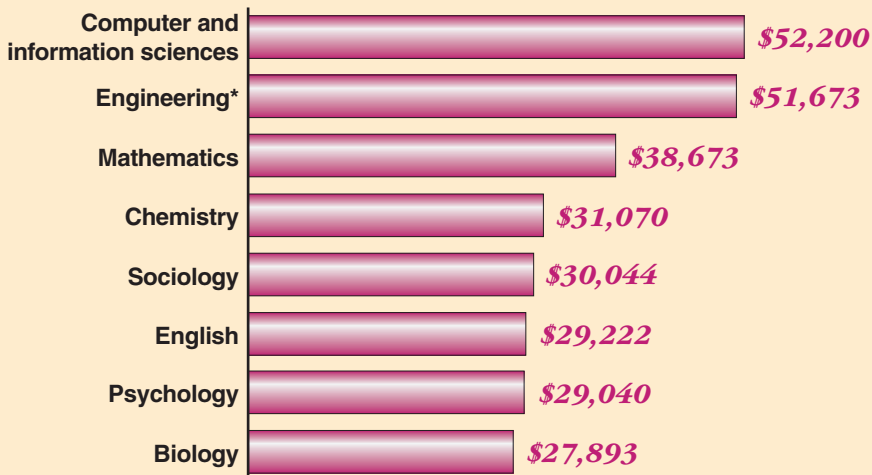
In 2013, some humanities advocates worry that government budget-cutting and a trend toward judging college education based on graduates’ salaries might cripple humanities research and liberal arts education.

An outside analysis presented in June to a bipartisan House and Senate group predicted “grave, long-term consequences” from what the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (AAAS) sees as declining government and public support for the humanities and social sciences. As evidence of weak societal support, the panel from the

Earnings Highest for Technical Graduates

Graduates with bachelor's degrees in technical fields such as computer science and engineering earn far higher first-year salaries, on average, than those with degrees in math, basic sciences and humanities.

First-Year Earnings for Bachelor's Degree Graduates in Virginia, by Major



*Includes general engineering and mechanical engineering.

Source: "Higher Education Pays: But a Lot More for Some Graduates Than for Others," *College Measures*, September 2013, <http://collegemeasures.org/post/2013/09/View-full-report-here.aspx>, p. 36. The study examined first-year salaries of graduates in Arkansas, Colorado, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

honor society and policy-advisory group points to trends such as a 41 percent drop over four years in federal funding for international training and education, a steep decline in the amount of civics education provided in K-12 schools and a shrinking percentage of federal education and research dollars going to humanities.⁴⁶

The group recommends greater investment in civics and foreign-language studies, establishment of a master teacher corps for humanities and social science and development of more unified college curricula focused on important, transferable skills.⁴⁷

"Today, our need for a broadly literate population is more urgent than ever," said the AAAS panel. "As citizens, we need to absorb an ever-growing body of information and to assess the sources of that information, . . . reflect

on the implications" of technological changes and "look beyond our borders" to communicate and interact with other societies and cultures.⁴⁸

Congress seems unlikely to approve increased support, however. In March, as lawmakers sought to finalize an urgently needed bill to fund the entire federal government, Congress passed and President Obama signed a measure sponsored by House Republicans that banned National Science Foundation (NSF) funding for any political science research except studies that benefit national security or economic interests. In a time of high government debt, it makes sense to fund only the highest priority research, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., remarked early this year. "Funds currently spent by the government on social science — including on politics,

of all things — would be better spent helping find cures to diseases."⁴⁹

In August the NSF canceled its annual call for grant requests for political science research, citing budget uncertainties.⁵⁰ Scholars have expressed outrage at lawmakers' attempt to shape what research on politics, society and government receives support. By requiring studies to be based on solid research methods and hard data, the NSF's "publicly financed research imposes a tax on dishonest arguments," thus helping to keep the national debate informed and honest, argued Henry Farrell, an associate professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, in Washington, D.C.⁵¹

The House Appropriations Committee has requested 49 percent funding cuts in fiscal 2014 for the two grant-making agencies, the National Endowment for the Humanities and National Endowment for the Arts. The cuts make sense, said the panel, because arts and humanities "are generally enjoyed by people of higher income levels," so paying for them with tax dollars constitutes a "wealth transfer from poorer to wealthier citizens."⁵²

Accountability Jitters

Humanities scholars tout their disciplines' value in teaching abstract thinking and providing tools for citizenship. But today, perhaps due to the lingering bad economy or changing cultural values, a smaller proportion of students than ever say learning is a top reason to attend college.

A recent survey of college freshmen conducted by the University of California-Los Angeles Higher Education Research Institute found that 87.9 percent of entering freshmen said getting a better job was a key reason to attend college, and 74.6 percent said being "able to make more money" was

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At Issue:

Should graduates' earnings guide evaluations of colleges?



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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, DECEMBER 2013

imagine you walk into a car showroom where the sticker on every car window says, "Expected mileage 24.6 mpg." When you ask the salesperson about the mileage of the model you're shopping for, the response is, "Well, 24.6 is the national average for all cars. That's all I can tell you." Obviously, that wouldn't be an acceptable answer. Yet, that's the situation we face with regard to one of the most important outcomes of a postsecondary degree: student earnings after degree completion.

Right now, we know that students with an associate degree earn more on average than those with a high school diploma, and students with a bachelor's degree earn more on average than those with an associate degree. But there is only spotty information about earning variations across schools, degrees and programs of study.

There is wide variation, however. The title of my report, "Higher Education Pays: But a Lot More for Some Graduates than Others," telegraphs this important fact, based on data from several states.

The report consistently found that students with liberal arts degrees usually fare poorly in the job market. At the bachelor's level, Arkansas graduates with a degree in music performance were the lowest paid graduates in the state (\$19,800 vs. \$32,800 for all graduates). In Tennessee, this distinction went to photography majors (average pay \$28,700 vs. \$37,600 for all graduates). In Virginia, philosophy majors earned just over \$20,000, compared to \$33,100 for all graduates. In contrast, students with technical degrees, especially engineering, top the salary scale. The poor pay performance of liberal arts graduates also is found at the master's degree level.

The United States supports a great diversity of higher education institutions, with different prices and different rates of return on the money and time students invest in degrees. And, right now most students are told that higher education is a good investment — and on average it is. However, the rates of return for degrees, schools and majors vary widely. Unfortunately, this information is not easily available to students, their families or the legislators who vote to support higher education with billions of dollars every year.

Just as consumers wouldn't buy a car without knowing the mileage of the models they're considering, the nation shouldn't accept not knowing the returns on the investments that students, families and taxpayers make in higher education.



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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, DECEMBER 2013

Common Cause founder John W. Gardner wrote that we must beware of exalting philosophers while scorning plumbers. Otherwise, we risk having a society where "neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water."

In 1968, Gardner was worried about the plumbers. But today, the plumbers are doing all right. It's the philosophers we need to worry about.

The White House recently proposed a rating system for higher education that will include institutional data on the salaries of recent graduates. Already, data-mining entrepreneurs are producing lists that prompt scary headlines about majors: *Kiplinger*: "Worst College Majors for Your Career"; and cheap shots about schools: PayScale.com: "5 best and worst schools for ROI" [return on investment].

None of this is news. Since the days when Socrates gave free lectures under a tree, we've known that philosophy doesn't pay much, but it seems fairly essential to a coherent, good society. We also know that engineering, also essential for constructing the tangible infrastructure of that good society, can be very lucrative.

But somebody has to provide counseling to all those rich engineers, teach their children, curate the museums they enjoy, write their novels, maintain the civic life of their communities and, yes, construct theories about inequality. Such occupations are not less worthy simply because they pay less.

Data on the salaries of alumni inform the college-choice process for prospective students. College presidents often say that college is "worth it" by pointing to the well-documented fact that college graduates earn nearly twice as much as someone with a high school diploma. Having used money to defend our existence, we cannot then refuse to show how our own graduates fare. If our institutions are as good as we claim, we should be proud to report outcomes like the percentage of employed graduates, types of careers, and, yes, average salary ranges for alumni across experience levels.

But — and it's a BIG but — there's a massive difference between the fair reporting of salary outcomes versus rating institutions (or majors) based on a rank-order of the specific salary values of the jobs held by our graduates. Ranking salaries disparages many occupations while exalting a few in a way that betrays society's need to have well-educated professionals across a full range of careers.

We need both philosophers and engineers. In reporting their earnings, do not exalt the one while scorning the other.

Continued from p. 1044

a key reason — the highest percentages ever. Furthermore, the highest percentage in history, 81 percent, said “being very well off financially” was either a “very important” or an “essential” personal goal.⁵³

Meanwhile, colleges and universities face growing pressure to demonstrate that degrees are worth the money spent on tuition, and graduates’ salaries are often suggested as the measuring stick. Humanities departments, in particular, find themselves under the gun, as data from several states show humanities grads at the bottom of the scale.

A 2013 analysis of graduates’ first-job salaries in five states in 2012 finds

“I’m worried about students borrowing \$100,000 for a degree that’ll have them earning \$25,000,” says College Measures President Schneider. A low-earning degree may not matter for students from well-off families, who might be able to get a parental loan for law school when times get tough, Schneider says. “But what if you’re a first-generation Hispanic student from Texas? If you choose a major and career that leave you temporarily poor, then you’re going to be permanently poor. Somebody has to tell you what outcomes to expect from degrees you might get,” he says. “I think we have an obligation to make this data available.”

in 2018 — be linked to graduation rates, tuition affordability and graduates’ salaries.⁵⁵

Many people, including the administration, agree that creating a valid and informative measurement system for colleges’ success is a daunting challenge. And basing college rankings and eligibility for federal aid partly on graduates’ salaries could “dissuade people from preparing for careers such as social work and history teaching,” says Humphreys, of the college and university group AACU. “We don’t pay these people well, but that isn’t because we don’t need them.”

Furthermore, she says, “we desperately need people who understand public issues a whole lot better” in order to sustain democracy, a principle the nation’s founders took seriously. That depends on providing broadly informative liberal arts education that stresses student intellectual involvement, not merely professional-skills courses, Humphreys says.

Nevertheless, said Lisa Dolling, an associate professor of philosophy and dean of the College of Arts and Letters at Stevens Institute of Technology, in Hoboken, N.J., “we must also remember that in a world where science and technology advance at record-breaking paces and continue to define our roads ahead, influence works both ways. As much as science and engineering curricula run the risk of being deficient without a humanistic foundation, so, too, must we ensure that those pursuing the traditional liberal arts obtain a firm . . . understanding of science and technology.”⁵⁶

Ironically, at the same time that Americans are looking to colleges more for specific career training, interest in humanities and liberal arts is growing in Europe, Asia and Africa, says NYU’s Santirocco. NYU is establishing a network of international campuses, and university staff are finding that countries such as China, where schools have traditionally focused on



Getty Images/Joe Raedle

Florida Republican Gov. Rick Scott wants to trim state college and university tuition for students in career-oriented majors while allowing it to rise for humanities students. The proposal fueled nationwide debate over whether funding liberal arts and technical majors at different levels is fair or effective in boosting the economy.

that career-oriented technical majors in disciplines such as computer science pull in the highest earnings. Non-career-specific science and math majors generally are in second place, and social science and humanities studies bring up the rear. (See graph, p. 1044.)⁵⁴

In August, Obama announced his plan to give colleges strong incentives to keep tuition costs down while ensuring that more students complete their degrees. Under the proposal, much of which would require congressional approval, schools’ eligibility for federal student aid would — beginning

technical training, want curricula rich in liberal arts and humanities, says Santirocco, who worked on curriculum development for NYU's Shanghai branch.

"It's become part of the economic agenda" because Chinese graduates "are operationally good, but they've never been invited to think creatively," he says. The "liberal" in "liberal arts" derives from a Latin word that means a free person. "In the more constrained societies, they have a touching faith in the liberal arts. At the same time the United States has lost its nerve and is turning to vocationalism out of fear." ■

OUTLOOK

'Road to Hell'

With a slow economy boosting vocational education, humanities and liberal arts educators must engage more with the non-academic world in order to keep their disciplines vital, many commentators say.

If there is a true job crisis in the humanities, it afflicts students with graduate degrees in a world where tenure-track professorships are scarce, says the University of South Florida's Dorn. "It's probably the easiest, slipperiest road to hell in academia — that administrators who want their schools to be known as regional institutions create graduate programs" that turn out more people with doctoral degrees than the traditional academic job market can accommodate.

Academia must not only work with others to help graduate-level humanities students find jobs outside of the university but must develop a planning process for graduate programs, Dorn says. "We can just say, there will never be any new [graduate] programs, or we can say there will be

new ones but old ones have to be shut down if new ones open. Leaving it as it is is unacceptable."

When undergraduate liberal arts majors can't find decent-paying first jobs, much of the blame lies with colleges, wrote Green, of New Jersey's Monmouth University. "Because we do not teach them how to transfer their academic learning into career skills," liberal arts majors often "overlook many career opportunities," especially in business, he said.

"Students learn history by developing the ability to critically read primary and secondary sources, analyze the information gained and then present conclusions through writing and class presentation. In many cases, such analysis and presentation involve numerical information and presentations along with the sophisticated use of computer technology. These are exactly the skills needed in most management positions," Green wrote. "Liberal-arts students may well be the best prepared for the well-paying careers of the 21st century. It is our job to make them aware of it." ⁵⁷

One creative approach would be to encourage students to double major, which could not only help employability but increase students' creative and analytical powers, argues Ohio State's Staley. "Study marketing but pair it with history or a foreign language. Double major not in English and history but in finance and history or chemistry and history."

A recent study by Vanderbilt University researchers backs up this idea. Studying two disparate fields broadens students' knowledge base, leads to originality because students can pull ideas from two very different areas, and teaches the art of thinking deeply to make connections between the disciplines, says the study. ⁵⁸

Decades ago "there was a political consensus that the humanities were valuable as a bulwark of democracy," and the remnants of that consensus

still exist despite some troubling signs, says Staley. To reactivate it, humanities scholars must stop talking only among themselves and reach out to the community to show the relevance and fascination of their work. "Our future will be defined by our interactions with the public."

A range of humanities disciplines, such as art history — which provides cultural education and trains the eye to make fine visual distinctions — could be important additions to K-12 schooling, says Stanford's Winterer. "Many, many kids, whether they know it or not, are really interested in the big questions of philosophy. And they're asking these questions in their own colloquial way."

Helping elementary and secondary schools enrich their curricula with such studies would prepare students better for college, she says. And "those that don't go to college can still learn that they're lovers and supporters of the humanities." ■

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The Next Step:

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Two college presidents, both from technical backgrounds, argue in favor of humanities education.

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Under pressure to prepare their students for the job market, colleges seek to balance STEM and humanities curricula.

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Humanities Studies

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