

October 30, 2013

As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry

By TAMAR LEWIN

STANFORD, Calif. — On Stanford University's sprawling campus, where a long palm-lined drive leads to manicured quads, humanities professors produce highly regarded scholarship on Renaissance French literature and the philosophy of language.

They have generous compensation, stunning surroundings and access to the latest technology and techniques of scholarship. The only thing they lack is students: Some 45 percent of the faculty members in Stanford's main undergraduate division are clustered in the humanities — but only 15 percent of the students.

With Stanford's reputation in technology, it is no wonder that computer science is the university's most popular major, and that there are no longer any humanities programs among the top five. But with the recession having helped turn college, in the popular view, into largely a tool for job preparation, administrators are concerned.

"We have 11 humanities departments that are quite extraordinary, and we want to provide for that faculty," said Richard Shaw, Stanford's dean of admission and financial aid.

The concern that the humanities are being eclipsed by science goes far beyond Stanford.

At some public universities, where funding is eroding, humanities are being pared. In September, for example, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania announced that it was closing its sparsely populated degree programs in German, philosophy, and world languages and culture.

At elite universities, such departments are safe but wary. Harvard had a 20 percent decline in humanities majors over the last decade, a recent report found, and most students who say they intend to major in humanities end up in other fields. So the university is looking to shape its first-year humanities courses to sustain student interest.

Princeton, in an effort to recruit more humanities students, offers a program for high school students with a strong demonstrated interest in humanities — an idea Stanford, too, adopted last year.

“Both inside the humanities and outside, people feel that the intellectual firepower in the universities is in the sciences, that the important issues that people of all sorts care about, like inequality and climate change, are being addressed not in the English departments,” said Andrew Delbanco, a Columbia University professor who writes about higher education.

The future of the humanities has been a hot topic this year, both in academia and the high-culture media. Some commentators sounded the alarm based on federal data showing that nationally, the percentage of humanities majors hovers around 7 percent — half the 14 percent share in 1970. As others quickly pointed out, that decline occurred between 1970, the high point, and 1985, not in recent years.

Still, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences issued a report this spring noting the decreased funding for humanities and calling for new initiatives to ensure that they are not neglected amid the growing money and attention devoted to science and technology.

In *The New Yorker* in August, the writer Adam Gopnik argued for the importance of English majors. *The New Republic* ran an article, “Science Is Not Your Enemy,” by Steven Pinker, a Harvard cognitive scientist. A few weeks later came a testy rebuttal, “Crimes Against Humanities” by Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, rejecting Dr. Pinker’s views on the ascendancy of science.

“In the scholarly world, cognitive sciences has everybody’s ear right now, and everybody is thinking about how to relate to it,” said Louis Menand, a Harvard English professor. “How many people do you know who’ve read a book by an English professor in the past year? But everybody’s reading science books.”

Many distinguished humanities professors feel their status deflating. Anthony Grafton, a Princeton history professor who started that university’s humanities recruiting program, said he sometimes feels “like a newspaper comic strip character whose face is getting smaller and smaller.”

At Stanford, the humanists cannot help noticing the primacy of science and technology.

“You look at this university’s extraordinary science and technology achievements, and if you

wonder what will happen to the humanities, you can be threatened, or you can be invigorated,” said Franco Moretti, the director of the Stanford Literary Lab. “I’m choosing to be invigorated.”

At Stanford, digital humanities get some of that vigor: In “Teaching Classics in the Digital Age,” graduate students use Rap Genius, a popular website for annotating lyrics from rappers like Jay-Z and Eminem, to annotate Homer and Virgil. In a Literary Lab project on 18th-century novels, English students study a database of nearly 2,000 early books to tease out when “romances,” “tales” and “histories” first emerged as novels, and what the different terms signified. And in “Introduction to Critical Text Mining,” English, history and computer majors use R software to break texts into chunks to analyze novels and Supreme Court rulings. *(These are examples of cultural “nuances”)*

Dan Edelstein, the Stanford professor who ran this summer’s high school program, said that while it is easy to spot the winners at science fairs and robotics competitions, students who excel in humanities get less acclaim and are harder to identify.

“I got the sense from them that it’s not cool to be a nerd in high school, unless you’re a STEM nerd,” he said, using the term for science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

True, said Rachel Roberts, one of his summer students.

“I live in Seattle, surrounded by Amazon and Google and Microsoft,” said Ms. Roberts, a history buff. “One of the best things about the program, that made us all breathe a sigh of relief, was being in an environment where no one said: “Oh, you’re interested in humanities? You’ll never get a job.”

For university administrators, finding the right mix of science and humanities is difficult, given the enormous imbalance in outside funding.

“There’s an overwhelming push from the administration at most universities to build up the STEM fields, both because national productivity depends in part on scientific productivity and because there’s so much federal funding for science,” said John Tresch, a historian of science at the University of Pennsylvania.

Meanwhile, since the recession — probably because of the recession — there has been a profound shift toward viewing college education as a vocational training ground.

“College is increasingly being defined narrowly as job preparation, not as something designed to educate the whole person,” said Pauline Yu, president of the American Council of Learned Societies.

While humanities majors often have trouble landing their first job, their professors say that over the long term, employers highly value their critical thinking skills.

Parents, even more than students, often focus single-mindedly on employment. Jill Lepore, the chairwoman of Harvard’s history and literature program, tells of one young woman who came to her home, quite enthusiastic, for an event for students interested in the program, and was quickly deluged with messages from her parents. “They kept texting her: leave right now, get out of there, that is a house of pain,” she said.

Some professors flinch when they hear colleagues talking about the need to prepare students for jobs.

“I think that’s conceding too quickly,” said Mark Edmundson, an English professor at the University of Virginia. “We’re not a feeder for law school; our job is to help students learn to question.”

His university had 394 English majors last year, down from 501 when he arrived in 1984, but Professor Edmundson said he does not fret about the future. “In the end, we can’t lose,” he said. “We have William Shakespeare.”

But for students worrying about their own future, Shakespeare can seem an obstacle to getting on with their lives.

“Students who are anxious about finishing their degree, and avoiding debt, sometimes see the breadth requirements as getting in their way,” said Nicholas Dirks, chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley.

Many do not understand that the study of humanities offers skills that will help them sort out values, conflicting issues and fundamental philosophical questions, said Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College.

“We have failed to make the case that those skills are as essential to engineers and scientists and businessmen as to philosophy professors,” he said.

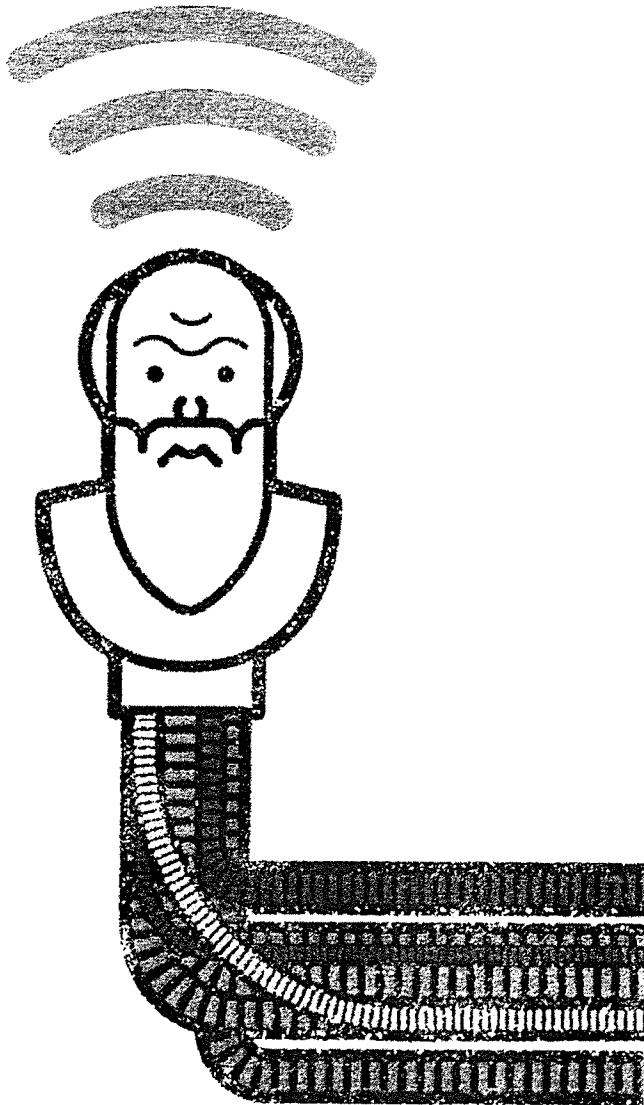
This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

EDUCATION

Liberal Arts in the Data Age

by JM Olejarz

FROM THE JULY–AUGUST 2017 ISSUE



ALEXEI VELLA

Scott Hartley takes aim at the “false dichotomy” between the humanities and computer science. Some tech industry leaders have proclaimed that studying anything besides the STEM fields is a

College students who major in the humanities always get asked a certain question. They’re asked it so often—and by so many people—that it should come printed on their diplomas. That question, posed by friends, career counselors, and family, is “What are you planning to do with your degree?” But it might as well be “What are the humanities good for?”

According to three new books, the answer is “Quite a lot.” From Silicon Valley to the Pentagon, people are beginning to realize that to effectively tackle today’s biggest social and technological challenges, we need to think critically about their human context—something humanities graduates happen to be well trained to do. Call it the revenge of the film, history, and philosophy nerds.

In *The Fuzzy and the Techie*, venture capitalist

mistake if you want a job in the digital economy. Here's a typical dictum, from Sun Microsystems cofounder Vinod Khosla: "Little of the material taught in Liberal Arts programs today is relevant to the future."

Hartley believes that this STEM-only mindset is all wrong. The main problem is that it encourages students to approach their education vocationally—to think just in terms of the jobs they're preparing for. But the barriers to entry for technical roles are dropping. Many tasks that once required specialized training can now be done with simple tools and the internet. For example, a novice programmer can get a project off the ground with chunks of code from GitHub and help from Stack Overflow.

If we want to prepare students to solve large-scale human problems, Hartley argues, we must push them to widen, not narrow, their education and interests. He ticks off a long list of successful tech leaders who hold degrees in the humanities. To mention just a few CEOs: Stewart Butterfield, Slack, philosophy; Jack Ma, Alibaba, English; Susan Wojcicki, YouTube, history and literature; Brian Chesky, Airbnb, fine arts. Of course, we need technical experts, Hartley says, but we also need people who grasp the whys and hows of human behavior.

What matters now is not the skills you have but how you think. Can you ask the right questions? Do you know what problem you're trying to solve in the first place? Hartley argues for a true "liberal arts" education—one that includes both hard sciences and "softer" subjects. A well-rounded learning experience, he says, opens people up to new opportunities and helps them develop products that respond to real human needs.

The human context is also the focus of *Cents and Sensibility*, by Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro, professors of the humanities and economics, respectively, at Northwestern University. They argue that when economic models fall short, they do so for want of human understanding. Economics tends to ignore three things: culture's effect on decision making, the usefulness of stories in explaining people's actions, and ethical considerations. People don't exist in a vacuum, and treating them as if they do is both reductive and potentially harmful.

Morson and Schapiro's solution is literature. They suggest that economists could gain wisdom from reading great novelists, who have a deeper insight into people than social scientists do. Whereas economists tend to treat people as abstractions, novelists dig into the specifics. To illustrate the point, Morson and Schapiro ask, When has a scientist's model or case study drawn a person as vividly as Tolstoy drew Anna Karenina?

Novels can also help us develop empathy. Stories, after all, steep us in characters' lives, forcing us to see the world as other people do. (Morson and Schapiro add that although many fields of study tell their practitioners to empathize, only literature offers practice in doing it.)

Sensemaking, by strategy consultant Christian Madsbjerg, picks up the thread from Morson and Schapiro and carries it back to Hartley. Madsbjerg argues that unless companies take pains to understand the human beings represented in their data sets, they risk losing touch with the markets they're serving. He says the deep cultural knowledge businesses need comes not from numbers-driven market research but from a humanities-driven study of texts, languages, and people.

Madsbjerg cites Lincoln, Ford's luxury brand, which just a few years ago lagged so far behind BMW and Mercedes that the company nearly killed it off. Executives knew that becoming competitive again would mean selling more cars outside the United States, especially in China, the next big luxury market. So they began to carefully examine how customers around the world experience, not just drive, cars. Over the course of a year, Lincoln representatives talked to customers about their daily lives and what "luxury" meant to them. They discovered that in many countries transportation isn't drivers' top priority: Cars are instead seen as social spaces or places to entertain business clients. Though well engineered, Lincolns needed to be reconceived to address the customers' human context. Subsequent design efforts have paid off: In 2016 sales in China tripled.


What these three books converge on is the idea that choosing a field of study is less important than finding ways to expand our thinking, an idea echoed by yet another set of new releases: *A Practical Education*, by business professor Randall Stross, and *You Can Do Anything*, by journalist George Anders. STEM students can care about human beings, just as English majors (including this one, who started college studying computer science) can investigate things scientifically. We should be

careful not to let interdisciplinary jockeying make us cling to what we know best. Everything looks like a nail when you have a hammer, as the saying goes. Similarly, at how great a disadvantage might we put ourselves—and the world—if we force our minds to approach all problems the same way?

A version of this article appeared in the July–August 2017 issue (pp.144–145) of *Harvard Business Review*.

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This article is about EDUCATION

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Pete Choo 2 months ago

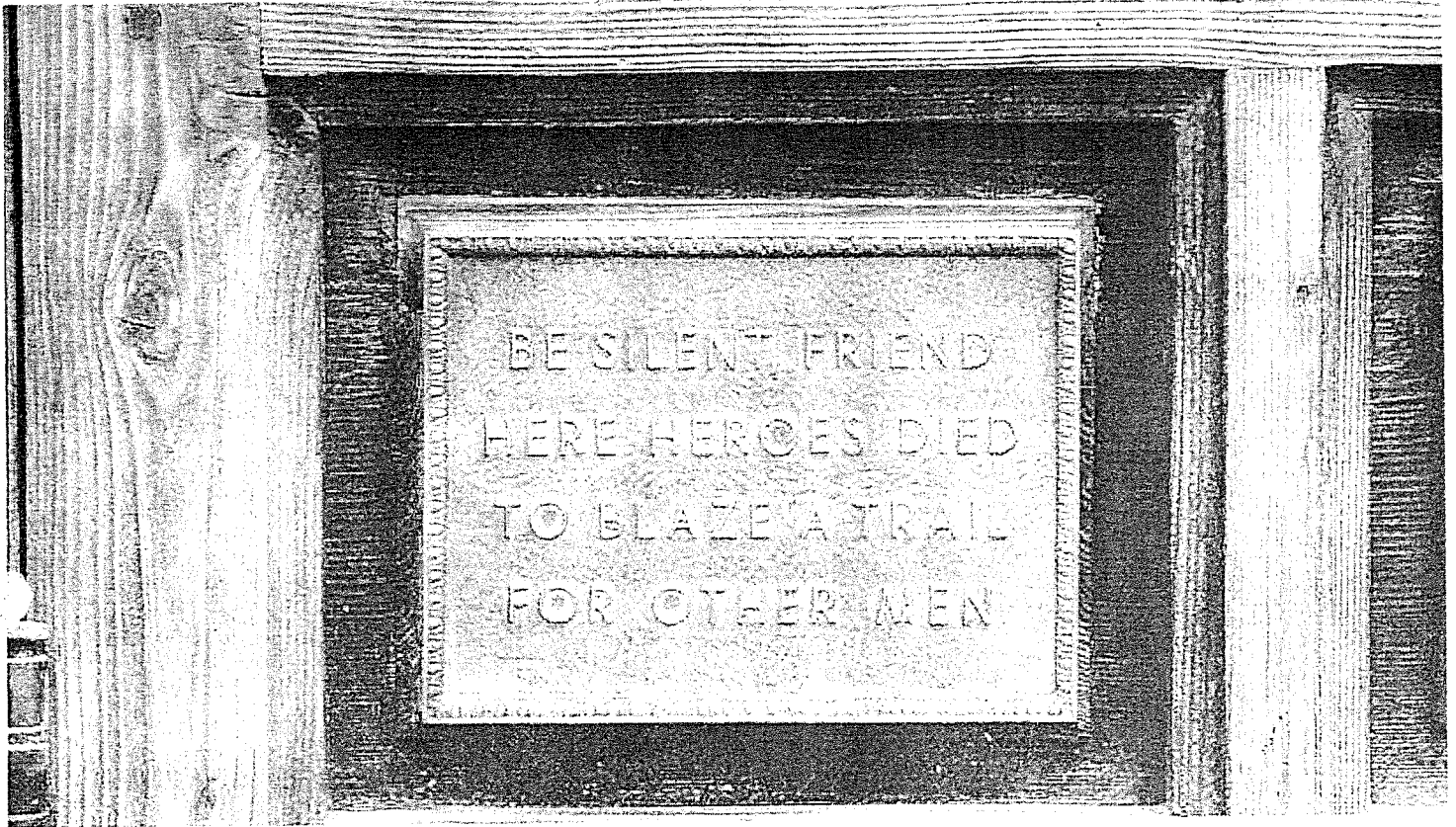
As a humanities major working for a technology / digital consultancy, I appreciated the close of this article - that it is less about tech firms swinging the pendulum back to favor liberal arts degrees and much more about valuing a diversity of skills.

I work with many technologists and engineers that bring real empathy to their work and are skilled communicators; I also work with people from a liberal arts background that have developed strong technical skills either on their own or over the course of their careers. By far, the colleagues I see with the furthest progression and steepest career trajectory exhibit two common (and interrelated) characteristics:

- They demonstrate a diverse blend of hard and soft skills and apply them extensively in their day to day work.
- They are possessed of a strong natural curiosity and ability to rapidly pick up and retain new skills.

Opinion / Op-Ed

Op-Ed History isn't a 'useless' major. It teaches critical thinking, something America needs plenty more of



The metal plaque on the front door of the Shrine at the Alamo in San Antonio Texas. (Los Angeles Times)

By James Grossman

MAY 30, 2016, 9:00 AM

Since the beginning of the Great Recession in 2007, the history major has lost significant market share in academia, declining from 2.2% of all undergraduate degrees to 1.7%. The graduating class of 2014, the most recent for which there are national data, included 9% fewer history majors than the previous year's cohort, compounding a 2.8% decrease the year before that. The drop is most pronounced at large research universities and prestigious liberal arts colleges.

This is unfortunate — not just for those colleges, but for our economy and polity.

Of course it's not just history. Students also are slighting other humanities disciplines including philosophy, literature, linguistics and languages. Overall, the core humanities disciplines constituted

only 6.1% of all bachelor's degrees awarded in 2014, the lowest proportion since systematic data collection on college majors began in 1948.

Conventional wisdom offers its usual facile answers for these trends: Students (sometimes pressured by parents paying the tuition) choose fields more likely to yield high-paying employment right after graduation — something “useful,” like business (19% of diplomas), or technology-oriented. History looks like a bad bet.

Politicians both draw on those simplicities and perpetuate them — from President Barack Obama's dig against the value of an art history degree to Sen. Marco Rubio's comment that welders earn more than philosophers. Governors oppose public spending on “useless” college majors. History, like its humanistic brethren, might prepare our young people to be citizens, but it supposedly does not prepare workers — at least not well paid ones.

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The utility of disciplines that prepare critical thinkers escapes personnel offices, pundits and politicians.

The diminished prospects for attorneys in recent years extends this logic, as the history major has long been considered among the best preparation for law school. The other conventional career path for history majors is teaching, but that too is suffering weak demand due to pressure on public school budgets.

A historian, however, would know that it is essential to look beyond such simplistic logic. Yes, in the first few years after graduation, STEM and business majors have more obvious job prospects — especially in engineering and computer science. And in our recession-scarred economic context, of course students are concerned with landing that first job.

Over the long run, however, graduates in history and other humanities disciplines do well financially. Rubio would be surprised to learn that after 15 years, those philosophy majors have more lucrative careers than college graduates with business degrees. History majors' mid-career salaries are on par with those holding business bachelor's degrees. Notably these salary findings exclude those who went on to attain a law or other graduate degree.

The utility of disciplines that prepare critical thinkers escapes personnel offices, pundits and politicians (some of whom perhaps would prefer that colleges graduate more followers and fewer leaders). But it shouldn't. Labor markets in the United States and other countries are unstable and

unpredictable. In this environment — especially given the expectation of career changes — the most useful degrees are those that can open multiple doors, and those that prepare one to learn rather than do some specific thing.

All liberal arts degrees demand that kind of learning, as well as the oft-invoked virtues of critical thinking and clear communication skills. History students, in particular, sift through substantial amounts of information, organize it, and make sense of it. In the process they learn how to infer what drives and motivates human behavior from elections to social movements to board rooms.

Employers interested in recruiting future managers should understand (and many do) that historical thinking prepares one for leadership because history is about change — envisioning it, planning for it, making it last. In an election season we are reminded regularly that success often goes to whoever can articulate the most compelling narrative. History majors learn to do that.

Everything has a history. To think historically is to recognize that all problems, all situations, all institutions exist in contexts that must be understood before informed decisions can be made. No entity — corporate, government, nonprofit — can afford not to have a historian at the table. We need more history majors, not fewer.

James Grossman is the executive director of the American Historical Assn. @JimGrossmanAHA

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