

The Humanities are a Necessity

We have discussed in these pages the change in attitudes toward higher education that have occurred in the past few decades. Once, education was seen as a benefit to society. It was recognized that democracy is well served by having an educated population, so states considered funding of higher education to be an investment in their future.

It is more common now to think of higher education as a personal benefit to the individual rather than as a wider benefit to a society, so the cost should be borne by the individual who will see the benefit rather than by the state. As a result, state support of higher education has eroded dramatically, and tuition has risen. Thirty years ago most state universities received about 75% of their operating expenses from the state; the portion has shrunk to less than 20% in many states.

Under this narrower definition, if I want to maximize my own benefit, that likely means concentrating on the money I will make when I have finished my education.

The result is that some disciplines are seen as more valuable than others, disciplines that are likely to lead immediately to jobs that will bring a high salary. The liberal arts are seen as less valuable than business, engineering, and nursing, for example, because we can't always draw a simple straight line between a major and a career with a specific title. Even within the liberal arts, the humanities fields are deemed less worthy than science and mathematics.

The humanities are those fields that explore human thought and culture, and include such disciplines as literature, history, philosophy, religion, and languages, among others. Devaluing the humanities is unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, the economic picture is not nearly as bleak as it is painted to be. Employers frequently cite skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and communication – skills that the humanities excel in teaching – as their most important criteria in hiring decisions. Moreover, data from Illinois State University tracking ten years of income show that rates of income growth for humanities graduates are comparable to those of disciplines across the University.

But this only tells students (and their parents) why they shouldn't feel that they have to run from the humanities. It doesn't tell them why they might pursue these fields passionately.

The humanities are part of the larger liberal arts education, which includes the social sciences and the natural sciences and mathematics. These disparate areas are integrated in that they address the same fundamental questions. The poet, the biologist, and the anthropologist, despite their very different perspectives and methods, are all trying to understand the nature of the world and our humanity.

All of the liberal arts disciplines nurture the transferable skills mentioned above – critical thinking, creativity, communication – but they are not the same across fields. The critical thinking of the historian may not be the same as that of the chemist. To solve the complex

problems we face today, we need multiple perspectives, relying on information from a variety of disciplines, but, even more importantly, their different approaches to problems. No response to the problems of our society is complete without the humanities perspective.

Beyond the role that the humanities play as a partner with the natural and social sciences, they are valued for their unique contributions to our understanding of the world. Through languages and literature, we are taken to new worlds, real and imagined. Through history, we gain insight into our intellectual and social heritage, and how the past has shaped our own lives. Through philosophy, we learn to consider the intellectual and ethical consequences of our actions, and to question our very nature. Through rhetoric and communication, we learn how individuals, organizations, and political bodies use information and persuasion to influence people and groups.

In short, it is these disciplines, more than any others, that allow us to think about what the future might be like, not financially or technologically, but socially, politically, and aesthetically. The humanities are not a luxury in a challenging economy, they are a necessity. They are concerned with the future of our species and our society. In challenging times, nothing is a greater concern than the human spirit.

Gregory Simpson
Dean
College of Arts and Sciences
Illinois State University

James M. Skibo
Distinguished Professor and Chair
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Illinois State University

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http://www.pantagraph.com/news/opinion/columns/guest-commentary-the-humanities-are-a-necessity/article_aa24bf8f-52b4-52a9-aaca-7dd22825fd52.html