
What Will the Humanities Look Like in a Decade?

To manifest their relevance and preserve their viability, they need to contribute to multidisciplinary initiatives focused on the numerous crises in humanity, not humanities, argues Robert D. Newman.

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For many years we have heard alarming news about the crisis in the humanities. The number of humanities majors in colleges and universities has declined steadily and, because of supply-and-demand funding formulas, so has the number of faculty positions. Several institutions have eliminated departments like classics, once the cornerstone of a liberal arts education. And some U.S. state systems and U.K. initiatives have proposed a differential tuition model premised on presumed pathways to employment that would further disadvantage study in the humanities except for those able to afford it, thereby underscoring the right-wing jeremiads branding the humanities as elitist.

The purported demise of the humanities stems from misinformed perceptions of their political, economic and social foibles – too left-wing, not sufficiently revenue generating, esoteric and therefore pompous. It's a deadly combination and a sure prescription for irrelevance. The counterarguments to these myopic labels have been cogently mounted, but the perceptions, and their suffocating consequences, persist. Ask most people from both inside and outside the academy to define the humanities and they typically respond with a list of disciplines: English, history, philosophy, foreign languages and cultures. Will another book on Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics or marriage dynamics in the Victorian novel raise the GDP? Probably not. Will it convert unsuspecting youth to self-loathing race apologists? Unlikely. But the emphasis on discipline and product confines the humanities to a procrustean bed that diminishes their fluidity, diversity and broad applications.

When asked to define the humanities, seldom will the answer include the methodologies fundamental to humanities study: problem solving, imaginative bridging, argumentative clarity, evidence-based analysis, among others. While these methodologies overlap with other fields of study, their application in humanistic inquiry dwells in the complexities and uncertainties that define the human condition. That is their overarching distinguishing feature as well as the substance by which to advocate, not just for their continued existence, but for their prominence through linkage to other disciplines in addressing our most crucial issues.

Here is where the humanities must flourish over the next decade in order to manifest their relevance and preserve their viability. They need to make alliances with and contributions to multidisciplinary initiatives focused on the numerous crises in humanity, not humanities. Resolutions to seemingly intractable problems require comprehensive approaches, including a humanities perspective. The crises are self-evident. They dominate the news. Emerging disciplines like environmental studies, cognitive studies, narrative medicine, computational linguistics, border studies and information theory should become the university departments of the future, all of which would have a humanities component in conversation with other fields. Academic reward systems, like tenure and promotion, must be re-engineered to embrace more collaborative and public-facing methods and products rather than sustain their current marginalized and suspect status. Podcasts, hybrid pedagogical models, community partnerships, international blogs and digital research tools are demonstrating that classrooms are not only within four walls and scholarship exists not only in pages between covers.

Only with a turn toward the pragmatic might the esoteric be safely preserved and nurtured. Commitments to curiosity, discovery and knowledge for knowledge's sake are the lifeblood of a vibrant civilization. Civil discourse and healthy debate foster such commitments. But all are in danger during prevailing crises that are simultaneously personal, cultural and planetary. The humanities investigate common questions like what it means to be human, what constitutes a good life, how we know the truth and how we preserve democracy. We can deepen these questions beyond abstractions by applying them in service to solving our society's most vexing tangible concerns. To reverse their decline for another decade, the humanities must burst their residential bubble, which once was a necessity and is now a detriment.

For the humanities to survive, democracy must survive, and the survival of democracy is predicated upon robust humanistic inquiry and principles. No area of study, whether the sciences, engineering, social sciences or medicine, is so fundamentally linked to human rights, compassion, the mutuality of the individual and the collective, and the essential preservation and exploration of freedom through life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Laws codify these practices. The humanities provide both the underpinnings of that codification and the methodologies by which they are refreshed and kept relevant.

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