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Humanities: The Building Blocks of Our Future

The choice of what to study in college is no easy task. With hundreds of options out there to set you on the right path, picking just one, and the right one at that, may seem impossible. There has been a recent push for students who are undecided to choose a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) major as it claims to offer a pre-rich education in technological industries that are booming. Previously, an undeclared major would focus on the liberal arts and would end up concentrating on the humanities (English, philosophy history, communication, etc.). These majors have been pushed aside and program sizes have been reduced to make room for the more prevalent STEM majors. The American public is unable to find the value in the humanities because they do not provide a clear vocational track for students in a “dog eat dog world”. However, it is harmful to discount the humanities as a beneficial option for a student. In fact, the humanities are still extremely important because they offer an education that is just as relevant as technology is in today’s society. The humanities are still valuable for students since they focus on refining skills through higher education that can benefit society as a whole via politics and economics.

The value of an education is dependent on how one applies it. An Ivy League education compared to a Junior College education is all relative in relation to how the student uses the skills and their newly gained knowledge. Carlo Rotella, an American Studies Program director at Boston College and writer for the Boston Globe, states that “you can’t fake a twenty page paper”

(Rotella 468). The attended school itself is not important, but the end result of graduating is. Rotella notes the meaning of it all is “if you worked hard and did your job properly and your teachers did theirs, is that you have spent four years developing a set of skills that will serve you in good stead in the postindustrial job market” (Rotella 486). The ideas and teachings from each course one takes can be applied in countless ways over a student’s lifetime. The humanities can provide students with ample abilities that can be used anywhere from an entry level sales position all the way through upper management in a major corporation.

The humanities as a whole have been labeled as “useless degrees” since they do not provide students with a clear career path. The long held idea that one needs to major in a “practical degree” with “guaranteed results”, such as going to medical school to be a doctor or studying engineering, is quickly becoming outdated. The fact of the matter is that a degree in humanities opens up many options for graduates as they will not feel constrained to one area of specialization. The humanities may often be overlooked as the general public does not recognize or understand what skills students are being taught. Tamar Lewin of *The New York Times* spoke with Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, and he told her that “many do not understand that the study of humanities offers skills that will help them sort out values, conflicting issues and fundamental philosophical questions” (Lewin). The humanities tend to focus on the internal self to explain how one makes decisions and what influences them. Once one has an understanding of self, then one can expand their view and look outward onto the world. This type of critical thinking and understanding is what makes the humanities so valuable. The most prominent major to have this type of focus is philosophy, but it is not limited to just that. Subjects such as Anthropology focus on how people lived in the past, while Writing and Rhetorical studies focus on breaking down an author’s words to get a better understanding of

their frame of mind and the society they live/lived in. The American writer David Foster Wallace explains that “the exact same experience can mean two totally different things to two different people, given those people’s two different belief templates and two different ways of constructing meaning from experience” (Wallace 481). He continues to explain that there is no right or wrong interpretation of an experience or work of art, and that one’s beliefs stem from the internal self as the world is constructed around the individual. Trying to understand another person’s views and beliefs is the constant struggle society tries to reconcile. It is something the sciences cannot answer as free thinking has no set formula. It is the humanities that help us gauge others and allow us to relate to them in order to establish proper communication.

The skills students can learn from the humanities should act as a base of higher education. Being able to relate to others and see situations from different perspectives promotes a sense of global equality. Adam Frank, an astrophysics professor at the University of Rochester, argues that although he is a scientist, the education system needs to emphasize the benefits of the humanities. His reasoning is that “without a base in humanities, both the students — and the democratic society these students must enter as informed citizens — are denied a full view of the heritage and critical habits of mind that make civilization worth the effort” (Frank). The cultures people identify with and how these cultures relate to each other all depend on skills gained within the humanities. Students must be prepared to fully understand and participate in a democratic system, whether it be in local or federal governments, or even within the workplace. Without the humanities, students are subjected to a limited and biased view of the world that can create tensions when facing diversity and objections. As a result, having an education with a strong base in the humanities can prepare an individual to be a global citizen.

The humanities are becoming increasingly more important as technology and the internet continue to bring people closer together. Individuals have the ability to have a larger voice in the world and are no longer limited to their local community. It has brought new meaning to the term “globalization”, as free flowing information and thoughts are shared on a worldwide scale. In his book, *Future Without a Past: The Humanities in a Technological Society*, John Paul Russo speaks of the current state of the world now that we are living with technology. Russo states that “at a time when the words difference, diversity, and multiculturalism are on everyone’s lips, and when postmodernism proclaims the end of totalizing systems, technology has been grinding the world relentlessly together” (Russo 24). The world’s differences are being compressed into a global community where we are forced into new ways of navigating our issues and must rethink communication standards. From the mid-1980’s on we have grown up in a computer culture, and without even knowing it, we cross from private to public spaces constantly throughout the day on our devices (Russo 2). Knowing what to say and how to say it is no longer dependent on a limited audience. Anything communicated through technology has the power to reach all audiences. As a result, the humanities can provide us the tools and knowledge to navigate these new spaces of communication that are being created daily.

Along with interpersonal communication, the political climate and world’s issues depend on the humanities. American philosopher Martha Nussbaum highlights the skills that result from an education in humanities, including “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’; and finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (Nussbaum 7). All of these abilities are the foundation of the world’s political systems. In the United States, the two party system has divided the nation, creating a constant struggle to find balance and unity across party lines. Trust

in the government has decreased as big businesses have influenced the political sphere and there is suspicion of collusion and ulterior motives. A healthy influx of humanities majors will allow skeptics to regain trust in the political environment. As Nussbaum points out, loyalties need to be put aside as the tasks at hand depends on the constituent's needs and understanding of the situation they are in. The political realm also heavily relies on properly communicating with one another, which is refined through the humanities. Being able to express the concerns of the people and argue for their wellbeing is the responsibility of a politician. As many issues are not always fully supported, the ability to address concerns and critically think to resolve issues that may arise are further developed through the study of the humanities.

The economy also depends on the humanities, although many would argue differently. Edward Conard's stance is that the American economy is dependent on innovation and having a properly trained workforce that can push new technology (Conard 469). He believes that "U.S. growth is predominately driven by successful high-tech startups, such as Google, Microsoft, and Apple, which have spawned large industries around them" (Conard 469). There is no doubt that these high-tech leaders in the marketplace have created the demand for increased production and resources, thus growing many new industries. Technology has been at the forefront of the American agenda ever since the Space Race in the 1960s. Our recent tech boom through the dotcom era of the 1990s has propelled a high demand for engineers and computer programmers. This new focus on technology has pressured students into studying a math and science-based education, especially as it provides financial stability. An emphasis on STEM majors has dramatically changed the funding to public institutions that many Americans attend. Mark Slouka of *Harper's* magazine notes that "the 'American Competitiveness Initiative' calls for doubling federal spending on basic research grants in the physical sciences over ten years, at a

cost of \$50 billion” (Slouka 478-479). This push towards STEM majors is taking away from the humanities as it allocates resources away from them and into the sciences, which could prove dangerous in the long run.

However, what Conrad fails to mention in his argument is the background of the individuals who are running some of these multibillion dollar tech companies. For example, the former CEO of IBM was a history major, a subject focusing on the exact opposite of technology, which emphasizes the new. Majors in the humanities, such as history, allow one to understand and process a vast and complex amount of data because both the past and present are taken into account. After being presented with all this data, the crucial part is being able to simplify it to its core idea. The humanities make it possible to convey a message and explain it simply to the general public, without losing the essence of the substance behind it. It is this kind of thinking that provides the basis of great leadership skills.

Despite all the available technology we have access to, we will always rely on the human element to run a business. Jac Fitz-enz, author of the book *ROI of Human Capital: Measuring the Economic Value of Employee Performance*, suggests in one of his eleven principles that it is a combination of people and information that drives business. Friz-enz states:

As we have increasingly introduced technology into our organizations, we have changed our cultures and our structures. Communication is the bedrock of a culture and is enhanced or inhibited by structure. Bringing people and organizations along as fast as technology is growing is the primary challenge (Fitz-enz 292).

These remarks from Friz-enz highlight the struggle many businesses are facing today. The ever changing systems and methods of communication are advancing far too quickly compared to companies and their employees. Businesses need to be able to harness the systems they have in

place and adapt how they train and communicate new information with their staff and customers. Those with strong humanities backgrounds are needed to come in to act as a communicator between the business and its employees, but also the business and its customers.

The push for American innovation is a balance between engineering and refining products for customers. Christain Madsbjerg and Mikkel Rasmussen, both advocates for the humanities, mention that it is crucial to understand the customer's world and figure out what they see on a daily basis through extensive analytical work (Madsbjerg and Rasmussen 472). All products are made and tailored to target specific audiences. This is not determined based on physical sciences, but rather by analytics gathered through studies and data that is best handled by one with a humanities background. They mention that humans are self-conscious and change their behaviors while being observed, offering yet another challenge on how to study human nature (Madsbjerg and Rasmussen 472). Any decision based off physical observation must be carefully processed through one's own perception of the world and then be made to fit as closely as possible to another's perception. This introspective look at human behavior is not easily taught as it is a skill that is developed through experience. It is clear that this daunting task is not one that a scientist or engineer can directly step into while having a technological-based perspective. Without the human element, businesses risk failing if the focus is on technology alone.

Introducing new products to the public requires someone who is skilled at working with the media, which the humanities have a special skill for as well. Producing media content and studying the effect it has on society plays a major role in businesses today. This role, taken on by mass communications, remains one of the most popular majors in the humanities. Its main challenge, and ultimate goal, is to influence customers to purchase a product. A lot of time and

effort goes into getting to know the target market audience, learning their buying habits, and learning how they consume media. Effectively marketing to different demographics requires a way of thinking that does not offer a specific formula that works every time. Being able to adapt to market trends and connect with clients on a level that can influence their decision making implements skills that are only strengthened through the humanities. It becomes a blend of understanding others' perceptions and then appealing to them emotionally that will build a bond with a company. Countless businesses and startup companies rely on people with this type of background and expertise in order to propel their business and technology into relevance today.

No matter what area of study, society, or business an individual may encounter, they are all deeply rooted in the humanities. As the skills for success are embedded in the teaching and application of the humanities, there must remain a commitment to their study and implementation on college campuses. The idea that there is no value in their study must be dispelled and replaced with the reality of what they truly offer students. Failing to do so will encourage continual decreased funding from the humanities; as it is, programs are already struggling to compete with the more popular STEM majors. Without a proper education rooted in the humanities, students will not learn the fundamental ideals of society. This includes historical studies of where one came from, all the way to the philosophical understanding of why one believes in their own truths. It will leave students asking questions but will provide them with no way of obtaining the answers on their own. Without a proper balance between the humanities and sciences, the progressive society we are witnessing in America will begin to lose its place among the great leaders of the world. The reforms society has fought for over the past two hundred years, including independence and civil rights, will all be in vein without the humanities. The future of a technological society is, in fact, the beginning of a new Renaissance

which relies on those educated in the humanities to help answer new questions that we have yet to explore.

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