

The heart of the humanities

In a culture that too often values people simply for their labor, learning for learning's sake is its own good.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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The humanities have faced strong headwinds in recent years. While there are some notable exceptions to dwindling enrollment numbers, the overall decline of humanities majors is disconcerting. Friends of mine in higher education tell of whole departments being put on the chopping block, once popular courses being discontinued, and their own tenure suddenly in jeopardy.

Why are these historically robust disciplines getting moved to the periphery of college course offerings and looking at a precarious future? The reasons are many. Clearly, technology has created a drag on the humanities, which typically require more reading and writing than web browsing and podcast listening. Students today seldom see their parents reading. Social media remains adept at shrinking attention spans. “Luckily, we still have some kids who can tear their faces away from their phones for about 75 minutes at a time and find these ideas compelling,” an English department chair said to me recently.

The grip of market forces on students and universities alike is real. Tuition inflation means increased personal debt for students, which creates fresh worry over earning potential, at least when contemplating the career prospects of their peers in science, technology, engineering, and math. University presidents explain budget cuts to faculty using language about “non-revenue-generating departments,” “undersubscribed enrollment,” and “no discernable future market growth potential” for particular disciplines.

Something in me wishes a ranking system for comparing college majors and earning potential had never been created. A university’s greatest purpose had better be more than just training up a workforce. In a culture that too often values people simply for their labor, learning for learning’s sake is its own good. The humanities specialize in fostering qualities of the mind like creativity, imagination, deliberation, moral reasoning, and more. College is a place where one discovers how much the mind can do.

Last year, Mississippi’s state auditor, Shad White, published a report that successfully annoyed plenty of people beyond the Magnolia State. The eight pages of *Plugging the Brain Drain: Investing in College Majors That Actually Work* do not discuss the benefit of education in any terms other than monetary value. White rails against taxpayer funding of “useless degrees” in “garbage fields” of the humanities. Between economic critiques like White’s own and mounting political scrutiny by conservatives nervous about what students are learning, it’s no wonder that the humanities are being forced to play defense.

But once the humanities get sized up in terms of their value proposition—monetary or otherwise—the game is as good as over. The most fascinating questions posed throughout human history—What is love? Who are we? Can a just society be achieved? Why are we here? Can people who commit evil be redeemed?—cannot be

explained in terms of value. Defenders of the humanities sometimes argue that they help create better citizens. That's like saying the reason to pray is because it inhibits the body's release of the stress hormone cortisol. That's not why we pray. Philosophy is about wrestling with some of the deepest questions ever posed; it's not a major one chooses for reasons of potential wealth accumulation because Peter Thiel and George Soros both majored in philosophy. Deciding to volunteer somewhere might provide a nugget to add to one's resume, but that's not why we volunteer.

The heart of the humanities will never be known through transactional understandings. The richness of such studies transcends the familiarity of the present through deep learning that helps foster an examined life, one marked by critical thinking, empathy, discernment, self-reflection, and much more. As Socrates says in Plato's *Republic*, it's about "the way one should live."