

Making the Humanities Public -- A White Paper

**By the “Making the Humanities Public” Undergraduate Collaborative
Research Group**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper focuses on the role and impact the humanities have within United States society and what their public perception is, as seen in United States newspaper publications. It is a summary of the research conducted by the Arnhold Collaborative Research Fellows whom advocate for the importance of the humanities within the public sphere. This paper is broken up into five sections: context of issues, materials & methodology, main findings/ observations, main recommendations, and an action briefing. As our research demonstrates, the primary issues facing the humanities are a lack of funding for humanities based programs, the preference of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math)-oriented individuals, and the fear that humanities based majors and jobs lack economic security. Through the use of topic modeling tools, our group looked over fifty different topic models that contained articles pertaining to the humanities. Some themes that arose from this research are as follows: first, the discourse around the humanities suggests its pervasiveness, which is to say that “*they are there, but not there.*” Second, that there exists a systemically-perpetuated tension between humanities based fields and STEM-related ones; this tension, more often than not, paints the humanities in a negative light. In order to combat these issues, as advocates for the humanities, this Collaborative calls for a greater emphasis on interdisciplinary media studies alongside universally accessible digital

humanities. Furthermore, we recommend pushing for a more obvious presence of the humanities where they already appear by taking advantage of their given real estate (e.g. places where important events have taken place, or where literary heroes have been) and creating more infrastructure to improve the writing and professional skills of individuals. To conclude, we call for action to be taken to spread awareness about the importance of the humanities through a dystopian cartoon art project, an empirical representation of the presence of the humanities, and a story map of the digital humanities.

CONTEXT OF ISSUES

The “Humanities in Crisis” can be categorized into three areas of discourse: economic value, university enrollment, and perceived risk/insecurity. The issue of economic value refers to the decline in federal/state funding for fine arts havens and facilities. When reviewing the topic model corpus, under the words “humanities” and “politics,” several articles addressed the concept of the humanities in decline under the scope of federal/state funding. The subject of economic value within the humanities therefore refers to the challenge of political backing and institutional funding for fine arts spaces, such as public art projects and library services. Following the issue of economic value, the challenge of university enrollment– found under the topics “humanities,” “fine arts,” and “university”– addresses the problem of the declining enlistment in courses within the humanities undergraduate departments. STEM was a recurring linked theme within these articles, attributing the decline of the humanities to an inverse increase of “technical” major/ field support. According to the corpus, the majority of articles alluding to the crisis of the humanities within the university environment argue that the main reason students

refuse to pursue fine arts degrees is due to the perception that degrees in these fields do not lead to an economically secure future, as opposed to their STEM counterparts. Furthermore, some articles addressed this issue within the context of rising student debt, and others focused on higher education as a vocational channel. These university-based assessments of the humanities illustrate the risk perception associated with pursuing majors/ fields within the humanities.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The primary methods used in this project were topic modeling and digital article based analysis. The topic modeling method involved a corpus of journalistic articles provided by the [WhatEvery1Says \(WE1S\)](#) project, a collaboration amongst faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates at various institutions. Their team used computer-assisted methods to gather, analyze, and generate data and insights on discussions within articles related to the humanities, ranging from 2010-2014. This collaborative research group then used this data to analyze a 50 topic model corpus.

The topic model(s) were organized as a collection of words denoting the “topics.” The documents were broken apart and then resorted to see how the collection of words related to each other. Organization was based on looking at the pure percentage of words in the topic within the articles, but oftentimes, articles appeared in the topic model that had no relevance. This is because such articles may contain a huge percentage of words in the long tail of the topic model, but not the “most frequent words.” In these cases, the Collaborative Research Group would look to outside sources for more relevant articles.

This Collaborative Research Group split up into three teams to cover three overarching questions:

- What does an overview of the public discourse on the humanities look like?
- How do articles focused on the humanities in particular intersect with other topics?
- How is the humanities represented in other areas of public discourse?

Each research team focused on one of these three questions. They then read and analyzed articles within the topic models to develop an understanding of the public discourse surrounding the humanities--specifically through a lens of their respective question. The teams then brought together all of their findings to compare overlapping themes. Once these themes were identified, further research and discussion external to the topic modeling corpus occurred. Online databases served as a research space for themes such as “humanities vs STEM.”

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

After analyzing articles that were “humanities” related, using the topic modeling tool to facilitate order and relativeness, this Collaborative Research Group found that a major aspect of discourse surrounding the humanities is one of *absence*. What do we mean by that? Much of the discourse dealing with the humanities tends to not deal directly with the humanities (as a societal and cultural presence), unless it is speaking about them in regards to economic issues, and the burdens these “lesser” fields produce when studying them in higher education. Yet, and this might be due to the methodology and tools involved, other articles that arose out of this study dealt heavily with the humanities in a more positive indirect way. These ways, however, were

subtle and insufficient to any substantive and productive discourse regarding the humanities as cultural and societal presences. A phrasing that is useful to implement regarding this conundrum is: “*they are there, but not there.*” What this primarily means, and entails, is that discourse around the humanities does indeed have a presence in the public sphere, but it is dealt with in subtleties. Several articles described venues, performances, and institutions that are humanities centered given their content (e.g. article #2, topic #21), and what this highlights is that there is a level of importance the humanities have in daily life *even if* the public sphere largely takes this presence for granted. Although these articles seemed misplaced at first, they have come to occupy a much larger importance than before imagined.

Even when there are venues dedicated to showcasing work in the humanities, contributions in this field still have difficulties garnering attention. Analyzing articles in topic #22 shows that it is challenging for humanities organizations to obtain exhibition settings in an already fierce competition for spaces. The article “CulturaDC Buys Space on G Streets” from *The Washington Post* gives a glimpse into a trend of displaced arts organizations facing the challenges in affording spaces to showcase artists. Another article from the same publication titled “Smithsonian Chief’s Next Call Should be to Step Down” provides insight on the complex process of selecting which artwork to showcase and the impact in neglecting or elevating certain pieces. So while research and artwork within the field of humanities does have a space, it still faces stark competition compared to other disciplines.

The existing, but unrecognized presence of the humanities is pervasive in nearly every component of modern life, not only traversing across communal and individual spheres, but also across professional and personal realms as well. It would be false, however, in stating that public

discourse completely disregards the existence of the humanities, but more often than not, the influences of humanities related fields of study are often marginalized and overshadowed by the presence of other disciplines, particularly those of STEM related. Inomata Takeshi's blog, "Scientists at Work: Excavating the Origins of Maya Civilization," of Topic model 19 illustrates the endeavors of humanities researchers diminished, rhetorically, by the affirmation of the contribution of STEM fields under the label of "scientists." The connotations behind the precise rhetoric, while seemingly minimal, play a profound role in shaping public understanding of the function/purpose of certain disciplines. This, in turn, produces a cultural dynamic narrow in its views, one that continues to perpetuate the assertion that specific disciplines, such as STEM related fields, are more valuable in the work and personnel that it produces.

Interestingly enough, when the achievements of humanitarians are publicly recognized, it is often done so by individuals who have already achieved a certain level of cultural status. One example is the text in topic model #19, "Quick Takes; Obama to Award Arts Medalists," which showcases the individuals presented with the 2013 National Medal of Arts. While this sort of attention demonstrates support, the lack of consistent endorsement, particularly at the micro-level, continues to undermine the everyday importance of the humanities by disproportionately celebrating the success of humanitarians as an exceptional phenomenon. These acknowledgments, as rare and minimal as they might be, relate the contributions of the humanities in a national context.

Even within these findings, however, some articles were outliers, and what they demonstrate open up other possible paths of dialogue surrounding public discourse of the humanities. Indeed, the "STEM v.s. Humanities" debate continues to perpetuate fixed ideas

about the functions and returns of certain fields of study. Articles within topic model #36 indicate fallacies behind having such polarized conceptions of these particular disciplines. They emphasize the skills humanities related disciplines produce, including the ability to think critically and imaginatively as a trait applicable to all professions. One article, “Getting Into Med School Without Hard Sciences,” presented the case of an individual gaining admission into medical school without majoring in the hard sciences. Here, a student recognizes that social determinants of health are more pervasive than the immediate biology--thus demonstrating the value of humanities based courses. Ultimately, what is demonstrated, is that the humanities do indeed have an important presence in the lives of Americans, however subtle and taken for granted this presence appears. Furthermore, humanities based fields of study are crucial for interdisciplinary understandings of societal issues.

The central way that public discourse of the humanities appears is in monetary and socio-economic value form. Some implied assumptions that arise are as follows: Will the humanities get you a job?; Will investment in the humanities be good for the economy?; Can you make money working in the humanities? An article from *The Washington Post* titled “Starting college? Here’s how to graduate with a job” takes up this conflict. The author of the article encourages readers to major in STEM, claiming that: “As an economics reporter, I feel compelled to say that if you’re interested in math or science or engineering or computers, and you have the aptitude for the coursework, then, please, for the love of GDP, give a STEM major a shot. The economy needs more math and science grads to drive the big innovations that will help America prosper.” This claim treats potential economic growth as a significant

consideration when choosing a job. At the same time, it discounts the possibility that humanities can offer anything of economic or innovative value.

Another finding is that of perceived value, or lack thereof, of the humanities from a governmental perspective. The repeating narrative is that of the humanities struggling to get funding because of their inability to relate their value to the federal government. One article from *The Washington Post*, titled “Bethesda groups aim to keep public art alive,” details the struggle of trying to keep public art maintained and vibrant without funding. The article describes how funding, which was originally at \$140,000, was reduced to \$9,000 as part of a cost-cutting measure. This indicates the lack of prioritization of arts funding, which is constantly under threat due to being perceived as non-essential. Another *Washington Post* article that discusses the budget negotiations in the Virginia legislature, substantiates this theme. The article “Funding for the arts might be left entirely to the private sector for the first time,” suggests that cutting arts funding is seen as a relatively painless way to make budget cuts. One quote states that: “With money scarce, Republicans propose eliminating government's role in areas that they believe are beyond the state's core function, especially the arts.” The House Majority Whip states that government funding for the arts is not necessary because “there are people who can step in and fund that”. This consequently leaves art funding to the private sector. Potential issues that arise from this is that the private sector might not treat arts funding as a priority, or might treat it as a commodity rather than as an essential aspect of life. The article about public art in Bethesda illustrates this issue when it states that: “While other private art galleries have closed this year - Gallery Neptune and Discovery Galleries closed in February, both citing rising lease rates - many connected to local art communities insist that the demand for art still exists.” Although art

does serve the public and is undoubtedly a crucial part of cultural life, it is often not able to be supported by the free market, despite the demand for it. The article supports the contention that there is demand for the arts and humanities by saying that: “Nationally, interest in free art has indeed risen, the Smithsonian Institution reported that through September, 23 million people have visited its 19 galleries and museums...Last year that total hit 30 million, a jump from 2006...”. This demonstrates a robust interest in public art. However, this public art cannot exist without government funding. This requires a reprioritization of funding and a greater assigning of value to the arts and humanities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As advocates for the humanities, this Collaborative Research Group calls for greater emphasis on new media studies alongside universally accessible digital humanities. Making this field more contemporary will allow for computers to no longer be competition but rather successful mediums for humanist work. This Collaborative Research Group urges society to stray from a binary choice between technology and humanities. Instead, it believes that utilizing an overlapping understanding of the two will take future generations much farther, giving them a refined eloquence that serves across a multitude of settings and insights, as well as a lifelong passion for learning. Indeed, combining the humanities with other fields like STEM equips students with the distinct skills needed for success and prosperity.

The humanities can be treated in such a way that demonstrates their value as form of history. For example, much like how locations of historical events become landmarks, histories of the humanities can be “mapped” in areas of significance in order to translate intrinsic value to

numeric value. This theme was seen in topic #42 of the corpus in the article titled, "203 Writers, 28 Homes, One Federal City." The article described the cultural context embedded within many of these physical spaces that have their value explicitly shown as monetarily higher based upon their historical legacies. The idea that those who have inhabited a space create value for it in the future can be used to showcase the complexity of a physical building or location. Consumers continue to be swayed by nostalgia, and presenting notable spots as such not only allows people to place themselves in an ever-changing timeline but also engage with art in a novel way. If locations that marked spaces of the artistic process were landmarked to keep historical value in real estate, a greater tangible appreciation for the humanities could be accessible to society. There might be some economic value associated with the concept of reading a copy of *To Kill A Mockingbird* while sitting on the porch of Harper Lee's house, or falling into a worn edition of *The Grapes of Wrath* surrounded by evolved views of the same places that John Steinbeck described.

Writing centers have the potential to serve as pivotal structures that allow students and professionals alike to improve individual writing skills. Writing skills are applicable to any profession, regardless of field or background. An organization's ability to produce succinct and effective documents is an integral and foundational function. In the article "Why Your Organization Needs a Writing Center," studies found that making efforts to improve the writing abilities of Bank examiners in the Philadelphia Fed led to an overall improvement in their efficiency and productivity. Essential aspects of successfully incorporating a program such as this one include: the promotion of an environment in which writing improvement is seen as productive; having a team of writers who share an interest in improving productivity; creating a

voluntary program that is highly encouraged rather than mandatory; focusing on learning through editing and then measuring the results to mark the improvements being made. The program studied in the article was proven to be successful, and programs similar to this should be considered by other companies and organizations to encourage efficiency and productivity in the workplace.

ACTION BRIEFING

In order to combat the challenges and scrutiny the humanities face in today's political, economic and social climate, this Collaborative Research Group proposes the following actions/ projects:

Dystopian Cartoon:

Cartoons are accessible and easy to discern. Creating a cartoon that depicts a society without the presence or impact of the humanities will offer insight into the importance of the humanities (and will work as a humanities based advocacy project in it of itself). Informed by the Russian novel, *We* (1924) written by Yevgeny Zamyatin, this political cartoon will emphasize the absence of the humanities by embodying notions of taylorization, calculated thought, and pragmatism—ideals normally associated with the more technical fields of scholarship. In addition, this cartoon will reduce or eliminate any influence or presence of literature, emotion, and humanitarian benevolent relationships. By creating an image of this one-sided, scientifically oriented society, this Collaborative Research Group hopes that this cartoon will illuminate the necessity and prominent role the humanities play in today's society by its absence.

Empirical Representation of Humanities Presence:

This project would function as a meta advocacy project that highlights humanities-based creative work. Being able to have quantitative observational data to measure the presence of the humanities in public discourse can utilize traditionally scientific methods for distinctly digital humanities goals. These observations can be presented in a data-presentation-driven context, its own form creating a way to reflect the technique overlap, and can be used to inform the following projects as well.

Timeline/Storymap of the Digital Humanities:

Interactive data visualization is compelling and engaging. Using Timeline and StoryMap developed by the Knight Lab to chart the history of the digital humanities as a discipline would be an effective way to show its rise as a field of study. In fact, one of the first projects to appear on the coast is UCSB's Voice of the Shuttle, one of the earliest research portals for the humanities created by Dr. Alan Liu of the English Department. In the academia world, newly developed programs and degrees are blending together humanities and STEM fields: Illinois Tech's Bachelor of Science in Humanities, UCSB's recent Science Communication track within the Writing Department, Stanford's research centers for digital humanities initiatives, etc. Digital rhetoric also has its place outside of campus. A group of bankers at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, for example, improved the clarity and effectiveness of their written reports by implementing a writing program as reported in the Harvard Business Review's "Why Your Organization Needs a Writing Center." Mapping out the debut of such programs and centers in business along with digital humanities initiatives in academia not only shows the creative potential in bridging the fields of humanities and STEM but also demonstrates that the humanities are necessary in society.

Increase Awareness and Education of the Humanities' Benefits Through Infographics:

Infographics are incredibly easy to understand and easy to share on platforms like social media. They should be constructed in a way that places emphasis on visuals and guides the viewer's eye to the main points. Potential topics include comparisons in funding between the humanities and STEM disciplines, a compilation of quotes from people in a variety of professions about how the humanities contribute to their work in the field, a chart listing the amount of awards available to humanities majors vs. other disciplines, and a graphic displaying what would happen if the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities were to be completely eliminated as proposed in the current administration's "budget blueprint."