

The liberal arts in neoliberal times

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In the neoliberal epoch the humanities have undergone a radical transformation.

The United States sometimes seems unremittingly utilitarian on the one hand (business) and sedulously superstitious on the other (religion). But it is far more than those economic and religious designations might suggest.

Just as medievalism was invented, and remains curated, in the mid-west, and just as so-so writers can be confident that their 'papers' will be purchased by college libraries there, so there is a disinterested, deeply scholarly side to US life. It is reflected in the little liberal arts colleges that dot the country, where tweedy profs with sensible shoes (as they are lovingly called) rub shoulders with lesbians-until-graduation (as they are misogynistically labeled) in leafy surroundings.

But the last thirty years have changed things. The neoliberal epoch has ushered in a dramatic transformation.

The humanities' share of majors stands at 8-12 percent of the nation's 110,000 undergraduates, depending on which count you favor in a massive system that has decentralized record keeping. That's less than half the figure from the 1960s, and the lowest point since World War II.

Between 1970-71 and 2003-04, English majors declined from 7.6 to 3.9 percent of the national total, other languages and literatures from 2.5 to 1.3 percent, philosophy and religious studies from 0.9 to 0.7 percent, and history from 18.5 to 10.7 percent. By contrast, business enrollments increased 176 percent, and communication studies shot up 616 percent. Many of the wee liberal arts colleges have shuttered their doors. Almost half the remaining ones see students majoring in business.

Downturns in student interest align with two phenomena: prolonged recessions, such as those curated by Republican Administrations from Ronald Reagan to the George Bushes, and an emerging passion for seemingly instrumental study areas such as business and government, especially in public schools designed for the proletariat and the middle class. These massive second-tier state schools are the physical heart of US higher education, where the vast majority of students are enrolled. And areas such as literature and history are not vastly popular there. Hardly a surprise when student debt stands at [one trillion dollars](#).

Fancy schools for children of the *bourgeoisie* and their favored subaltern representatives, notably the Ivy Leagues, continue to encourage young people who are finding themselves en route to the elite to do so via the doubting Dane and the suiciding Plath. The rest of the country doesn't think it can afford the privilege.

The numbers are not just about enrolment trends in abstraction. They reflect students' neoliberal investment in human capital, as per [Gary Becker](#) and his chorines. And they are to do with the universities' own values and Federal Government policies.

Compared with other fields, tenure-track hiring in language and literature occurs at two-thirds the national average. In 2009, just 53 percent of humanities faculty was in full-time employment, and an even smaller proportion in tenurable positions. A similar discount applies to salaries. In 2003, health academics were paid an average of \$6,000 more than in 1987, during which time the humanities average declined by a thousand dollars; in 2005-06, a business academic cost twice as much as a humanities one, compared to one and a half times as much twenty years earlier.

And research support? National Science Foundation (NSF) grants went from being five times the size of their National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) equivalents in 1979 to thirty-three times in 1997. In 2007, the NEH received 0.5 percent of the National Institutes of Health's budget and 3 percent of the NSF's, while in 2010, a pitiful 0.45 percent of Federal research support went to the humanities.

The [2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#), the Keynesian salvation from the global financial crisis, saw the NSF receive US\$3 billion. The Act provided not a cent to humanities research. Barack Obama's [2011 State of the Union address](#) called for increased expenditure on research, education, and teachers of mathematics and science. He did not mention the humanities.

The story is gloomy and dismal.

But that is a story about the traditional humanities, the ones 'we' think of when we look at the *New York Times* gleefully making fun of literary theory or queer readings at its annual [denunciation](#) of the Modern Language Association's conference .

And the fact is that there are two humanities in the United States. The distinction between them, which is far from absolute, but heuristically and statistically persuasive, places literature, history, and philosophy on one side (Humanities One) and communication studies on the other (Humanities Two).

Humanities One primarily resides in Research-One private universities, liberal arts colleges, and a few privileged state schools. Humanities One is venerable, powerful, and tends to determine how the sector is discussed in public - but almost no one studies it.

Humanities Two is the humanities of everyday state schools and is focused more on undergraduates' job prospects - but has no media profile. Humanities One dominates rhetorically. Humanities Two dominates numerically. Thousands of grad students are churned out of the system based on the fantasy that these two humanities are one and will continue as currently constituted.

We need a blend of the two, such that the useful theories and methods of each percolate into the other. We need Humanities Three. It will appeal to the politics and ideals of those opposed to neoliberalism, even as it will be attractive to students who have been driven to instrumentalism by the weight of student loans and the threat of precarious employment.

To give an idea of what this *rapprochement* would look like, here is an imaginary set of queries to pose to traditional literary scholars (actually, to any literary scholar) and new communications faculty (a few of whom will actually know the answers):

- how many texts (books, movie tickets, on-line rentals, games) are sold in the countries they study?
- how many people buy or borrow texts each year, and what proportion read virtual or material versions?
- which companies dominate cultural production and why?
- how many such corporations are there now versus ten or twenty years ago?; and
- what empirical research is available on forms of reading, playing, and viewing texts?

Can they explain:

- the business structure of the culture industries?
- the experience of working in them as a forester, designer, or driver?
- the relationships between novelists, agents, and editors?

- how books appear in the front of chain stores (or are never in stock)?

- the role of the International Publishers Association, the Pan African Booksellers Association, the Book Industry Study Group, the Publishers Database for Responsible and Ethical Paper Sourcing, the Federation of Indian Publishers, the Fédération des Editeurs Européens, the Society of Publishers in Asia, and the Book Industry Environmental Council—or their equivalents in other sectors?

- cultural policies affecting publishers and libraries?

- the relative environmental impact of e-books versus paper ones and on-line searches versus air travel?

These eco-materialist principles can percolate through Humanities Three, offering students the answers to questions from beyond the traditional cloisters - but also beyond the myopia of neoliberalism.

Note: The references backing up the data used in this piece can be found in [Blow Up the Humanities](#) (Temple UP, 2012).