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A Case for the Humanities

Walking through Peltier Hall and White Hall on Nicholls State University's campus are two entirely different experiences. White Hall, belonging to the business school, is new, modern, and equipped with a plethora of current technology. Peltier Hall, of the humanities, conversely feels aged and run-down. The state of these two buildings reflects the present, most common American attitude towards the humanities. Many Americans question the validity of the humanities, dismissing them as useless or even dangerous. The results are that students more and more are opting for "practical" majors that they believe will lead them to immediate employment after graduation, and politicians increasingly advocating STEM and business majors. Personally, as a history major, I have found myself arguing for the validity of my area of study to friends and relatives for nearly four years. To hone a more articulate argument for the humanities, I interviewed three of my professors, men who have dedicated their careers to the humanities. I met with Dr. David Whitney, Department Chair of Government, Dr. Paul Wilson, Department Head of History, and Dr. Todd Kennedy, of the Languages and Literature department. While I received some drastically different answers from all of them, they agreed that a basis in humanities was critical to a well-rounded, educated person; not only because of the expanded worldview one acquires but also for the essential skills of thinking they foster.

To understand why the humanities go undervalued in America, one must first understand the most typical critiques of the humanities. Dr. Justin Stover, Ph.D. is a

lecturer at the University of Edinburgh; he argues in his article "There Is No Case for the Humanities" that one of the most prevalent criticisms of the humanities is that there is "too little teaching" within those programs. Stover points to the conservative fear that humanities teachers are using their positions to indoctrinate their students into the political left, instead of teaching their required material. Dr. Wilson pointed to this issue as well in our interview: "[the humanities are] A wonderful approach to understanding the human condition, but if it's in the hands of an ideologue, you're really just indoctrinating students, they're not getting an education." This is undoubtedly a founded fear; some professors are using their platform to persuade students politically. However, Wilson's argument presupposes that students utterly cannot think for themselves and that they are simply empty vessels awaiting indoctrination. Stover refutes this critique by pointing out what he thinks is the real goal of humanities teachers: "humanists are doing what they have always done, trying to bring students into a class loosely defined around a broad constellation of judgments and tastes. This constellation might include political judgments, but it is never reducible to politics." In essence, the humanities are meant to combat mindless ideological adherence through exposing students to different points of view and teaching them to think critically.

By far the most common critique of the humanities is the myth that its graduates acquire no "marketable skills," and that it is impossible to find a job within those fields outside of teaching. Not only is this argument is very unimaginative, but it drives students with a potential passion for art, philosophy, or history away into other more widely accepted majors. Purely from a utilitarian perspective, the humanities can lead to

financially successful careers because of the skills its graduates acquire. In our interview, Dr. Whitney argued that skills humanities majors learn include "[the ability to] think critically and analytically, knowing how to read and write, communicating orally with another person, and communicating through writing. Those are skills that will transfer into any career." According to the article, *What Can I do With My Liberal Arts Degree?* from the United States' Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), a humanities graduate could apply their skills to careers in many different fields. For example, "...English majors usually have editing and writing skills, which are essential for media, public relations, and publishing occupations. And geography majors are well suited to location-based urban planning" (Gehlhaus 5). Also, rising salaries for humanities graduates are a part of a long-term trend, according to Diana Gehlhaus. Between the years 1975 to 2001, humanities graduates saw a salary increase of 67 percent. These salaries compare well with engineering and business graduates, whose wages during this period had an overall growth of 26 percent and 29 percent, respectively (Gehlhaus 6). Therefore, the critique that humanities majors are useless in the job market is ultimately unfounded. However, while gaining employment after college is a significant aspect of education, it is not the prime purpose of the humanities, and ultimately not the goal of the university itself.

The university, Whitney argues, has multiple purposes. One of these purposes is to instill civic virtue within its graduates, no matter their discipline. The idea of civic virtue, dating back to the beginnings of political philosophy in Ancient Greece, entails a citizen being oriented towards the community at large, instead of focusing solely only on his or her self-interest. The kinds of actions that constitute civic virtue change between

different forms of government and various cultures, but it is essential to creating a happy and healthy community. Civic virtue can most readily be impressed through education, because of the broader perspective and worldview education provides. In his First Annual Message to Congress, George Washington stated, "There is nothing which can better deserve your patronage than the promotion of Science and Literature." He continued, stating that the acquisition of knowledge was the "surest basis of public happiness" (Benson 1). Therefore, to create a better, happier community, that community must be filled with well-educated citizens with excellent communication and thinking skills. This goal of the university, and ultimately the goal of the population, align with the purpose of the humanities: to create contemplative people who can contribute to the community at large.

Unfortunately, state funding for Nicholls State University, especially for humanities programs, is shrinking every year. Not only is the lack of state funding affecting humanities majors, but it is also significantly hurting general education programs. In my discussion with Dr. Kennedy, he pointed out that a quality general education program ensures students can be substantial thinkers in other areas besides their majors. This, in turn, strengthens students in their fields because it teaches them to apply different ways of thinking to their majors. Recently, general education programs at Nicholls have become more watered down to compensate for lack of state funding. According to Dr. Whitney, some majors do not require students to take a single government class. History courses have also become vestigial within general education. According to Dr. Wilson, in 2014 all students were required to take six hours of history to

graduate. Now, there are no history courses required for general education; all that is needed is a set number of "open humanities" hours. In addition to a reduction in the quantity of humanities courses, lack of state funding affects the quality of those courses. Larger class sizes, fewer teachers, less debating in class, and ultimately less critical thinking are all symptoms of a poorly funded humanities program. Not only does this create weaker students individually, but it affects the United States as a whole. Education is not just a private good; it is also a public good. An educated country is one in which "tyranny is less likely to take root" (Whitney). Therefore, well rounded general education courses for all majors should be essential to the university and the state.

The practical good of the humanities is significant, but arguably their best quality is what is least quantifiable: the humanities are an attempt to gain a deep understanding of the world. Disciplines like art, literature, and philosophy wrestle with questions of the human experience to better the soul. While business majors concern themselves with finances and data, humanities majors concern themselves with gaining wisdom. Without the humanities, life is not worth living. When I asked Dr. Kennedy why he chose English, he told me that he loves "the connections across culture and the expansive worldview that English can offer you." Subjects like the humanities help us understand the world around us in higher terms, separate from data, numbers, and finances. Without the liberal arts, the world would lose a critical perspective on human existence.

The future of the humanities within the university is precarious. With funding for these disciplines shrinking every year, it is difficult to predict the future of these programs. Dr. Wilson fears for the humanities, and wonders if one day the government

will stop funding them altogether. Dr. Kennedy conversely takes a more optimistic approach to the future, saying that in the long term, the skills acquired with humanities degrees will justify themselves, and cause those programs to "come back." He used China as an example. He said that for almost two centuries, China took almost all humanities out of its education system, and what resulted was "workers who could create a lot of things for very cheap, but can't really compete with more high-tech things because they can't think critically." More recently to correct this, China has placed more of a focus on the humanities within its education system. While Dr. Kennedy does not worry about the liberal arts in the long-term, he worries about how individual students will be affected by the current societal and political apathy towards the arts. Progress is not always linear, but the humanities will in time both outpace and outlive all of those who underestimate their substance.

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