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The Economic Case for Saving the Humanities

By Christina H. Paxson

What can we do to make the case for the humanities? Unlike the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), they do not —on the surface—contribute to the national defense. It is difficult to measure, precisely, their effect on the GDP, or our employment rates, or the stock market.

And yet, we know in our bones that secular humanism is one of the greatest sources of strength we possess as a nation, and that we must protect the humanities if we are to retain that strength in the century ahead.

I do not exactly hail from the center of the humanities. I'm an economist, with a specialization in health and economic development. When you ask economists to weigh in on an issue, the chances are good that we will ultimately get around to a basic question: "Is it worth it?" Support for the humanities is more than worth it. It is essential.

We all know that there has been a fair amount of hostility to this idea recently in Congress and in State Houses around the country. Sometimes it almost feels as if there is a National Alliance against the Humanities. There are frequent potshots by radio commentators, and calls to reduce government spending in education and scholarship in the humanities.

It has become fashionable to attack government for being out of touch, bloated, and elitist; and humanities funding often strikes critics as an especially muddle-headed form of government spending. For that reason, the humanities are in danger of becoming even more of a punching bag than they already are.

In the current economic environment, these attacks have the potential to sway people. Any expenditure has to be clearly worth it. “Performance funding” links government support to disciplines that provide high numbers of jobs. Or, as in a Florida proposal that emerged last year, a “strategic” tuition structure would essentially charge more money to students who want to study the humanities and less money for those going into the STEM disciplines.

As a result, there is grave cause for concern. Federal support for the humanities is heading in the wrong direction. In fiscal year 2013, the National Endowment for the Humanities was funded at \$139 million, down \$28.5 million from FY 2010, at a time when science funding stayed mostly intact. This is part of a pattern of long-term decline since the Reagan years.

I believe the question is fair. Are the humanities worth it? To push back against the recent tide of criticism, I’d like to offer several strategies.

First, we need to argue that there are real, tangible benefits to the humanistic disciplines—to the study of history, literature, art, theater, music, and languages. In the complex, globalized world we are moving toward, it will obviously benefit American undergraduates to know something of other civilizations, past and present. Any form of immersion in literary expression is helpful when we are learning to communicate and defend our thoughts. And it should not be that difficult to concur that a thorough and objective grounding in history is helpful and even inspiring when applying the lessons of our past to the future.

This point came home to me when, in my previous role as Dean of Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School, I went to the university archives to read the reports and correspondence that concerned the formation of the School in 1929. The founding director of the School, DeWitt Clinton Poole, wrote that the need was not for “young men minutely trained in

specific technicalities” but, instead, for a “broad culture that will enlarge the individual’s mental scope to world dimensions.” Accordingly, the curriculum was designed to ground students in both the social sciences and the humanities. At that time—on the eve of the Great Depression—there was concern that such an “impractical” education would be of little value. Indeed, one alumnus wrote that the curriculum “is not immediately useful to the boy who has to earn a living.” Yet, if one looks back over the course of the school’s rich history, it is evident that many of the men and women who were exposed to that curriculum went on to positions of genuine leadership in the public and private sectors.

We know that one of the best aspects of the undergraduate experience is the fact that it is so multifaceted. Our scientists enjoy studying alongside our humanists and vice versa. They learn more that way, and they do better on each side of that not-very-precise divide. When I ask any of Brown’s business-leader alumni what they valued most during their years at Brown, I am just as likely to hear about an inspirational professor of classics or religion as a course in economics, science or mathematics.

Second, we need to better defend an important principle that centuries of humanism have taught us—that we do not always know the future benefits of what we study and therefore should not rush to reject some forms of research as less deserving than others. In 1939, Abraham Flexner, the founding director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton wrote an essay on this topic titled “The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge.” It was published in Harper’s in 1939, on the eve of World War II, a time when we can assume there was a high priority placed on military and scientific knowledge. In this essay, Flexner argued that most of our really significant discoveries have been made by “men and women who were driven not by the desire to be useful but merely the desire to satisfy their curiosity.”

Flexner’s essay underscores a very important idea—that random discoveries can be more important than the ones we think we are looking for, and that we should be wary of imposing standard criteria of costs and benefits on our scholars. Or perhaps I should put it more precisely: We should be prepared to accept that the value of certain studies may be difficult to measure and may not be clear for decades or even centuries.

After September 11, experts in Arabic and the history of Islam were suddenly in high demand—their years of research could not simply be invented overnight. Similarly, we know that regional leaders like Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa will rise in relevance

and connectivity to the United States over the next few decades, just as China and India already have. To be ready for those relationships, and to advance them, we need our humanists fully engaged.

And third, the pace of learning is moving so quickly that I would argue it is all the more important that we maintain support for the humanities, precisely to make sure that we remain grounded in our core values. As many previous generations have learned, innovations in science and technology are tremendously important. But they inevitably result in unintended consequences. Some new inventions, if only available to small numbers, increase inequity or competition for scarce resources, with multiplying effects. We need humanists to help us understand and respond to the social and ethical dimensions of technological change. As more changes come, we will need humanists to help us filter them, calibrate them, and when necessary, correct them. And we need them to galvanize the changes that are yet to come. Our focus should not be only on training students about the skills needed immediately upon graduation. The value of those skills will depreciate quickly. Instead, our aim is to invest in the long-term intellectual, creative, and social capacity of human beings.

■ started by saying that we should embrace the debate about the value of the humanities. Let's hear the criticisms that are often leveled, and do what we can to address them. Let's make sure we give value to our students, and that we educate them for a variety of possible outcomes. Let's do more to encourage cross-pollination between the sciences and the humanities for the benefit of each. Let's educate all of our students in every discipline to use the best humanistic tools we have acquired over a millennium of university teaching—to engage in a civilized discourse about all of the great issues of our time. A grounding in the humanities will sharpen our answers to the toughest questions we are facing.

We don't want a nation of technical experts in one subject. We want a scintillating civil society in which everyone can talk to everyone. That was a quality that Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of when he visited the United States at the beginning of the 1830s. Even in that era before mass communication, before the telegraph, before the Internet, we were engaged in an American conversation that stretched from one end of the country to another. In a similar manner, Martin Luther King Jr. sketched a "web of mutuality" in his

“Letter from Birmingham Jail,” fifty years ago this year. We want politicians who have read Shakespeare—as Lincoln did. We want bankers and lawyers who have read Homer and Dante. We want factory owners who have read Dickens.

It is really important we get this right. A mountain of empirical evidence indicates a growing inequality in our society. There is no better way to check this trend than to invest in education. And there is no better way to invest in education than to invest fairly, giving attention to all disciplines and short shrift to none.

Earlier generations have weighed these questions, and answered in the affirmative. An early graduate of Brown, Horace Mann, trained in the humanities, was instrumental in creating the public school system of the United States. He knew that a broad, secular education, open to all, was one of the foundations of our democracy, and that it was impossible to expect meaningful citizenship without offering people the tools to inform themselves about all of the great questions of life. Horace Mann said, “Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.” In that spirit, let’s continue this conversation, eager to engage the critics in a spirited conversation whose very richness depends on the humanistic values we cherish.

And in conclusion: yes, it’s worth it.

Christina H. Paxson is the president of Brown University. This piece was adapted from remarks delivered at the Annual Meeting of the National Humanities Alliance at the Marvin Center, George Washington University Washington, D.C. on March 18, 2013.

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