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Regional

Claims of demise of humanities greatly exaggerated

One debate that has taken place over the last few years in higher education has been about the future of the humanities. They are broadly defined as a group of disciplines that study human culture and include modern and ancient languages, linguistics, history (including art history) and philosophy among other areas. These disciplines have been under attack from many quarters in the last few years because of the stereotype that their study does not lead to immediate and well-paying jobs after graduation.

Governors from states including Florida, Texas and Wisconsin have said that they do not intend to keep financing humanities and liberal arts studies in general in their state university systems. Some leaders of postsecondary institutions have also voiced the opinion that state universities should become little more than trade schools that concentrate on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines.

Sometimes support for these ideas has come from unexpected places. On Jan. 30, 2014, President Barack Obama, during a visit to a General Electric plant in Wisconsin, stated that “folks can make a lot more potentially with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.” He later apologized and called his remark “glib.”

So are the humanities really as useless as some politicians and university leaders say they are?

Since 2008 the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (created in 1780 by some of our founding

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

fathers) has been surveying the humanities sector in higher education and their latest report titled “The State of the Humanities: Higher Education 2015” provides some useful information for champions of the humanities, as well as for those I call the “humanities deniers.”

The report shows that despite the political winds and the recession of 2008, there has been little change in the number of university departments that teach humanity disciplines. And only 6 percent of institutions have ceased to grant degrees in these fields. Also, the share of new bachelor’s degrees in colleges and universities conferred on students in the humanities has gone from 12 percent in 2007 to 10 percent in 2014, while the number of humanities as second majors is about 25 percent of the total of the graduates.

Interestingly enough, associate degrees (those conferred by 2-year colleges) in the humanities have increased almost four times as much as they have in baccalaureate-granting institutions.

New book publications, which are the main venue for many faculty members doing research in the humanities to disseminate their scholarly work, has increased from 48,597 in 2009 to 51,789 in 2012, showing that their

research output has not diminished but increased.

Funding for humanities research is, by far, much less expensive than for the sciences, which usually requires costly labs and equipment. Yet, financial support for research in the humanities depends mostly on the backing by postsecondary institutions themselves, the federal government and private foundations. And it has increased by 54.6 percent from 2005 to 2012.

So why should we be concerned about diminishing support for the teaching of the humanities in higher education? The reasons are many and profound. Students learn from the humanities disciplines a number of skills that are extremely useful no matter what their career path. Critical thinking, communication skills and problem-solving abilities, among others, are emphasized in a humanities education. In fact, about a year ago the head of a large engineering firm told me that he preferred to hire engineers that had a liberal arts background because they are better equipped at thinking “outside the box” when it came to solving problems. He added that they were overall better communicators.

If anything, we should be emphasizing the teaching of these skills even more, and the reasons are all practical in nature. In 2014 the average SAT scores on the verbal test taken by high school students and used as an indicator of college success dropped to nearly historic levels. And we all know that if you are not able to communicate well you will not be able to succeed in today’s

competitive world, from doing well at a job interview to generating the kind of materials that your supervisors and customers expect from you.

No wonder postsecondary institutions (particularly public ones) are spending more and more of their shrinking resources in providing remedial English classes to their incoming students.

But let’s not fool ourselves. This new anti-humanities rhetoric is part of a larger anti-intellectual movement aimed at public higher education that started years ago. It was Feb. 8, 1967, when the recently elected governor of California, Ronald Reagan, said, “taxpayers shouldn’t be subsidizing intellectual curiosity.”

It is time for all of us, from politicians to captains of industry, from college administrators to the general population, to demonstrate some critical thinking and courage and come up with a strong defense of the humanities for the benefit of society as a whole. As the prominent British public intellectual Terence Francis “Terry” Eagleton once said, “In the end, the humanities can only be defended by stressing how indispensable they are; and this means insisting on their vital role in the whole business of academic learning, rather than protesting that, like some poor relation, they don’t cost much to be housed.”

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