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Rethinking the Bachelor's Degree to Bolster the Humanities

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By Jeff Selingo

The classic liberal-arts major on college campuses has been in a state of crisis for several decades now.

The number of bachelor's degrees awarded in traditional arts-and-sciences fields (English, mathematics, biology) peaked in the late 1960s, when about half of all degrees awarded were in those disciplines. Today, such majors account for about a quarter of degrees, as students have fled to practical degrees in vocational fields, such as business and communications or, more recently, sports management and computer-game design.

Among the liberal-arts fields, the natural sciences still receive plenty of attention, thanks to the focus on STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) in the last decade-plus. The real story, as we learned in a report last week to Congress by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, is the fall of the humanities. Today, just 7 percent of graduates in the country are humanities majors.

The academy's report lays out plenty of recommendations for reversing the trends, including fellowships in the humanities and social sciences, a group of master teachers, and increased study-abroad opportunities. But the report falls short in its recommendations for higher education to rethink college majors and the entire structure of the bachelor's degree in order to strengthen the humanities in the future.

The question we should be asking is whether our goal is to produce more humanities majors or to create more majors over all with the kinds of skills that often define those disciplines: clear writing, critical thinking, and the ability to draw on the broad knowledge of various fields.

As the vast majority of American colleges moved to more of a vocational model in the last two decades, they simply fit that curriculum into the existing four-year mold, even though the occupational programs were more akin to two-year master's programs.

The result is that those vocational degrees are more time-consuming and costly than they need to be, especially when you consider that many students who earn the degrees end up going for specialized master's degrees anyway. Indeed, the rate of growth in the annual production of master's degrees—long considered a credential of specialization—is fast outpacing the increase in bachelor's degrees.

Perhaps we can achieve the goals of the American Academy's report and reduce costs to students by reimagining undergraduate education. Instead of the 4+2 system employed by most colleges and

universities today (four-year bachelor's degrees followed by two-year master's programs), colleges could differentiate themselves in the marketplace by adopting a 2+2 or 3+2 system.

Under such a structure, the bachelor's degree would be more of a blending experience from high school. It would be defined by acquiring broad knowledge across fields and experiential learning that puts that broad knowledge to immediate use through research, study abroad, or apprenticeships (where students could also earn money), all allowing typical 18-year-olds to explore and really figure out what they want to do with their lives.

A different conception of the undergraduate degree would also put less pressure on students to pick a college major in high school. According to studies conducted by the psychologist William Damon, only two in 10 young people have a clear vision of what they want to accomplish in life.

That is one reason why, by the end of their first year, a quarter of all freshmen change their minds about their field of study, according to the Freshman Survey, conducted annually by the University of California at Los Angeles. Half of first-year students say they plan to change majors.

If majors are so changeable in that first year of college, why do we force so many students to choose one early on? It's no wonder many of them pick something "practical"; they have little chance to explore careers through internships or other off-campus experiences, where they can see for themselves that English majors can actually work at investment firms or pursue a variety of careers.

Continuing to bemoan the current condition of the humanities will only deepen the crisis among students who think they are majoring in dying fields. Rethinking our conception of undergraduate education could help improve the state of the humanities for everyone.



procrustes ★ 2 hours ago

While the 3+2 model has some merit, I have doubts about the "blending experience from high school." Part of our problem is that the average student didn't learn much in high school. There are too many high school graduates who can barely read and write, and lack general knowledge of their own and other cultures. And now we are seeing too many college graduates with the same characteristics. Slapping a new coat of paint on this disgraceful situation will not help. Systemic problems need to be addressed at every level, starting with K-12.

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Well, you won't find students choosing majors in business or communications or sports management or computer-game design at any Ivy League institution because none of those majors is offered in the Ivies, which seem to be thriving just fine without giving in to the vocational trend. And Ivy graduates don't seem to be suffering unduly in the job market either. I'd guess the same is true for the small elite liberal arts colleges like Amherst, Williams, Vassar, Smith, Holyoke, Swartmore, etc. So, maybe the reforms suggested here apply mainly to the large public institutions.

What is badly needed in undergraduate education is more of an effort to interrelate courses and subjects across disciplines. Especially at research institutions, faculty are into their own highly specialized interests, and courses reflect silos of specialized knowledge more than they do broad terrains of knowledge. It is incumbent on universities to find a way to foster learning across disciplines and even within them that is more systemic and less fragmented. E.g., how can a student be expected to understand the philosophy of Hegel or Nietzsche without knowing about Greek philosophy first? But often a student will take a course focusing on the latter with no prior exposure to the ancients. This leads to impoverished learning or, at best, a remedial effort to give students the background they need to understand the subjects they are being taught.

---Sandy Thatcher