**Undergraduate humanities majors are on the decline, and at what cost?**

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I am an undergraduate student, and I’m double majoring in data science and communications. I added data science because I was told it made me “eminently hirable.” In another world, I am an English major. In this world, I am studying science to succeed post-graduation, and many of my peers ~~have~~ followed suit.

Less than [10%](https://direct.mit.edu/daed/article/151/3/11/112685/The-State-of-the-Humanities-circa-2022)of all bachelor’s degrees are in the humanities (Townsend & Bradburn, 2022). Meanwhile, STEM majors are on the rise; engineering majors have more than [doubled](https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-the-number-of-college-graduates-in-the-humanities-drops-for-the-eighth-consecutive-year/) over the last 20 years (Barshay, 2021). The humanities are dying, and it will have devastating consequences.

STEM majors became popular in recent years because of a shifting job market. The Bureau of Labor Statistics [estimates](https://www.teachercast.net/why-does-a-stem-curriculum-need-empathy/) that by 2025, the United States will need more than one million STEM professionals in the workforce (Anonymous, 2018).

The growing job sector is compounded by a worsening economy. Janet Abbate, a professor in the Department of Science, Technology, and Society at Virginia Tech, also noticed that fewer undergraduates are interested in the humanities.

“For the students themselves, the idea is you need to major in something that’s going to make you money,” she said.

The pressure to become financially successful is only compounded by the rising cost of an undergraduate education. Over half of students leave college with debt, and the average amount owed in loans is [over $28,000](https://www.forbes.com/advisor/student-loans/average-student-loan-statistics/) per person (Hahn, 2022).

“I feel like there’s so much fear around college, around the price of it and the competitiveness of it,” Abbate said. “I feel like we’re in a very odd kind of fear driven culture around college right now, and I’m not really sure how we ended up there.”

The shift is a long time coming. The number of students studying humanities [dropped](https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-the-number-of-college-graduates-in-the-humanities-drops-for-the-eighth-consecutive-year/) in 2008 during the Great Recession (Barshay, 2021). Economic downturns happened [before](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/), and students always came back to the humanities when the economy recovered (Schmidt, 2018). This time was different. More and more students fled the humanities for more profitable disciplines, and they didn’t come back.

The lack of students studying humanities coupled with the growing number of STEM majorscreated a crisis of communication. Abbate said that current undergraduate students are not learning about broader communication and writing skills, and dangerous consequences will follow.

“There’s a lot of stories about colossal software disasters,” said Abbate. “Multi-million dollar projects just crash and burn and are never used. It’s not that the coding wasn’t right, but they didn’t get the requirements right. So maybe it sort of worked in some sense, but it didn’t actually do what the customer wanted, and that’s a communication problem. It's not a technical problem.”

Communication is not the only casualty. Losing the humanities also means losing empathy.

Studies show that engineering students are [less empathetic](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/01/130117084854.htm) than other majors (*Engineers Less Empathetic*, 2013), and STEM curricula [infrequently](https://ipg.vt.edu/DirectorsCorner/re--reflections-and-explorations/Reflections111618.html) emphasize the development of empathy (Guerra & Guerra, 2018).

This is deeply troubling. The growing job market means that more people with STEM degrees will make important decisions and engineering tools which affect thousands of people. Without empathy, engineers will forget about the societal impact of their work. It will become efficiency-centered as opposed to human-centered and will bring out implicit biases without even thinking to correct them. This is how we end up with racially biased programs that make it harder for Black people to receive [medical care](https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/algorithms-in-health-care-may-worsen-medical-racism) (Grant, 2022), or predict that Black people are more likely to [commit a crime](https://www.propublica.org/article/machine-bias-risk-assessments-in-criminal-sentencing) (Angwin et al., 2016).

Communication, writing and empathy are necessary for a holistic education. The job market might demand more STEM majors, but they don’t have to leave the humanities behind them. It’s not helpful to society to have an influx of STEM-trained students who can’t synthesize information or work as a team.

And after all, they’re called the humanities because it’s the study of human society and culture. I fear for the future of a world where higher education is willing to abandon what makes us human.

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