Why we still need to study the humanities in a STEM world

It is common to hear today, in the era of big data and STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — that liberal arts degrees are, well, relatively worthless. What is someone with a degree in English literature going to do with it, besides teach?

The question isn’t new. A decade ago, a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics magazine published an article titled “What Can I Do With My Liberal Arts Degree?” which starts with this: “What are you going to do with a degree in that? Do you want to be a teacher?”

Since then, private and public pushes to increase STEM education have given rise to new concerns about the value of a liberal arts education — as well as arguments about why it is incredibly valuable, even to people going into STEM fields. A new book by George Anders titled “You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Education,” says:

*Curiosity, creativity, and empathy aren’t unruly traits that must be reined in to ensure success. Just the opposite. The human touch has never been more essential in the workplace than it is today. You don’t have to mask your true identity to get paid for your strengths. You don’t need to apologize for the supposedly impractical classes you took in college or the so-called soft skills you have acquired. The job market is quietly creating thousands of openings a week for people who can bring a humanist’s grace to our rapidly evolving high-tech future.*

And it makes this point:

*The more we automate the routine stuff, the more we create a constant low-level hum of digital connectivity, the more we get tangled up in the vastness and blind spots of big data, the more essential it is to bring human judgment into the junctions of our digital lives.*

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A liberal education is a cohesive collection of experiences, each providing its own unique contribution to the enlightenment of its practitioners. Typically, a liberal arts education involves the study of the natural sciences (including mathematics), the social sciences, and the humanities. (The natural sciences and math are frequently associated with STEM — science, technology, engineering, mathematics — and not considered to be part of a liberal education, even though they are.)

One approach to defining the humanities involves lists: literature, philosophy, foreign language, etc. However, this not only fails to provide a definition but sometimes sparks disagreements about which areas fall within the humanities. More general definitions provide further insight into what the humanities are, but they can be confusing and lead people to conclude they are irrelevant, overly simple, not valuable, and not worthy of serious study. Some definitions indicate the humanities are disciplines that study human culture or examine the human condition. Such terms, too, become open to broad and varied interpretations, which can easily lead to confusion.

Rather than defining the fields within humanities, we can try to explain what study in the humanities does. We might say fields within the humanities study and analyze artifacts that are created by human beings, such as literature, music, art, etc. We might say the humanities help us to analyze and grapple with complex moral issues, help us understand what goes on inside of us, that is, show us what it means to be a human being. In reaction to such definitions, however, the nonbelievers reject the need to study the humanities; after all, they are human beings, they grapple with complex issues pretty much on a daily basis.

Through studying the humanities, one has the opportunity to get to know oneself and others better, the opportunity to become better able to understand and grapple with complex moral issues, the complexities and intricacies of humanity.

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The value of the humanities can only be fully appreciated by experiencing and knowing them. In response to the question: “What are the humanities?” University of Amsterdam Professor Rens Bod noted, “It is like the notion of ‘time’ in St. Augustine: if you don’t ask, we know, but if you ask, we are left empty-handed.”

Therefore, it isn’t so important to define the humanities, or what field is or isn’t part of the humanities; what’s important is what studying a humanities discipline does for the person experiencing it. Studying a humanities field involves moving beyond the search for the immediate and pragmatic; it opens one to the examination of the entirety of the human condition and encourages one to grapple with complex moral issues ever-present in life. It encourages reflection and provides one with an appreciation and empathy for humanity. This is why critical thinking done in the humanities goes beyond problem solving.

Even if we cannot agree on what they are, the humanities are an important part of the way. Given the state of the country and the world today, they are more important than ever.