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## **In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth**

**By PATRICIA COHEN**

One idea that elite universities like Yale, sprawling public systems like Wisconsin and smaller private colleges like Lewis and Clark have shared for generations is that a traditional liberal arts education is, by definition, not intended to prepare students for a specific vocation. Rather, the critical thinking, civic and historical knowledge and ethical reasoning that the humanities develop have a different purpose: They are prerequisites for personal growth and participation in a free democracy, regardless of career choice.

But in this new era of lengthening unemployment lines and shrinking university endowments, questions about the importance of the humanities in a complex and technologically demanding world have taken on new urgency. Previous economic downturns have often led to decreased enrollment in the disciplines loosely grouped under the term "humanities" — which generally include languages, literature, the arts, history, cultural studies, philosophy and religion. Many in the field worry that in this current crisis those areas will be hit hardest.

Already scholars point to troubling signs. A December survey of 200 higher education institutions by The Chronicle of Higher Education and Moody's Investors Services found that 5 percent have imposed a total hiring freeze, and an additional 43 percent have imposed a partial freeze.

In the last three months at least two dozen colleges have canceled or postponed faculty searches in religion and philosophy, according to a job postings page on [Wikihost.org](http://Wikihost.org). The Modern Language Association's end-of-the-year job listings in English, literature and foreign languages dropped 21 percent for 2008-09 from the previous year, the biggest decline in 34 years.

"Although people in humanities have always lamented the state of the field, they have never felt quite as much of a panic that their field is becoming irrelevant," said Andrew Delbanco, the director of American studies at Columbia University.

With additional painful cuts across the board a near certainty even as millions of federal stimulus dollars may be funneled to education, the humanities are under greater pressure than ever to justify their existence to administrators, policy makers, students and parents. Technology executives, researchers and business leaders argue that producing enough trained engineers and scientists is essential to America's economic vitality, national

defense and health care. Some of the staunchest humanities advocates, however, admit that they have failed to make their case effectively.

This crisis of confidence has prompted a reassessment of what has long been considered the humanities' central and sacred mission: to explore, as one scholar put it, "what it means to be a human being."

The study of the humanities evolved during the 20th century "to focus almost entirely on personal intellectual development," said Richard M. Freeland, the Massachusetts commissioner of higher education. "But what we haven't paid a lot of attention to is how students can put those abilities effectively to use in the world. We've created a disjunction between the liberal arts and sciences and our role as citizens and professionals."

Mr. Freeland is part of what he calls a revolutionary movement to close the "chasm in higher education between the liberal arts and sciences and professional programs." The Association of American Colleges and Universities recently issued a report arguing the humanities should abandon the "old Ivory Tower view of liberal education" and instead emphasize its practical and economic value.

Next month Mr. Freeland and the association are hosting a conference precisely on this subject at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. There is a lot of interest on the national leadership level in higher education, Mr. Freeland said, but the idea has not caught on among professors and department heads.

Baldly marketing the humanities makes some in the field uneasy.

Derek Bok, a former president of Harvard and the author of several books on higher education, argues, "The humanities has a lot to contribute to the preparation of students for their vocational lives." He said he was referring not only to writing and analytical skills but also to the type of ethical issues raised by new technology like stem-cell research. But he added: "There's a lot more to a liberal education than improving the economy. I think that is one of the worst mistakes that policy makers often make — not being able to see beyond that."

Anthony T. Kronman, a professor of law at Yale and the author of "Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life," goes further. Summing up the benefits of exploring what's called "a life worth living" in a consumable sound bite is not easy, Mr. Kronman said.

But "the need for my older view of the humanities is, if anything, more urgent today," he added, referring to the widespread indictment of greed, irresponsibility and fraud that led to the financial meltdown. In his view this is the time to re-examine "what we care about and what we value," a problem the humanities "are extremely well-equipped to address."

To Mr. Delbanco of Columbia, the person who has done the best job of articulating the benefits is President Obama. "He does something academic humanists have not been doing well in recent years," he said of a president who invokes Shakespeare and Faulkner, Lincoln and W. E. B. Du Bois. "He makes people feel there is some kind of a common enterprise, that history, with its tragedies and travesties, belongs to all of us, that we

have something in common as Americans.”

During the second half of the 20th century, as more and more Americans went on to college, a smaller and smaller percentage of those students devoted themselves to the humanities. The humanities' share of college degrees is less than half of what it was during the heyday in the mid- to late '60s, according to the [Humanities Indicators Prototype](#), a new database recently released by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. Currently they account for about 8 percent (about 110,000 students), a figure that has remained pretty stable for more than a decade. The low point for humanities degrees occurred during the bitter recession of the early 1980s.

The humanities continue to thrive in elite liberal arts schools. But the divide between these private schools and others is widening. Some large state universities routinely turn away students who want to sign up for courses in the humanities, Francis C. Oakley, president emeritus and a professor of the history of ideas at Williams College, reported. At the [University of Washington](#), for example, in recent years, as many as one-quarter of the students found they were unable to get into a humanities course.

As money tightens, the humanities may increasingly return to being what they were at the beginning of the last century, when only a minuscule portion of the population attended college: namely, the province of the wealthy.

That may be unfortunate but inevitable, Mr. Kronman said. The essence of a humanities education — reading the great literary and philosophical works and coming “to grips with the question of what living is for” — may become “a great luxury that many cannot afford.”

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