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Are The Liberal Arts Dead? No, Just Changed

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I write on the human/political issues surrounding college admissions.

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LOS ANGELES, CA - APRIL 23: A student walks near Royce Hall on the campus of UCLA on April 23, 2012 ... [+] GETTY IMAGES

Much of the discussion around the changing landscape for the liberal arts seems to imply that most colleges and most college students act in a similar manner. But the range of college options is incredibly broad, as are the needs and motives of the students

attending them. There are large public flagship universities, smaller regional public universities, colleges where students are **all expected to work**, **Catholic colleges**, technical colleges, and even colleges that purport to **change students' lives**.

There are just as many different reasons for attending college. Some students are looking at highly selective colleges seeking to prepare for graduate work, obtain impressive credentials or explore an intellectual passion. Three quarters of college students attend public colleges, spread between flagship universities, regional colleges and community colleges. Many students are adult learners or students attending part-time.

One trend that seems to be overtaking almost all colleges and students is the reduction of students majoring in the liberal arts. Colleges across the country have been curtailing their liberal arts offerings. The number and percentage of high school graduates applying to college is at its **lowest level** in almost 20 years. Undergraduate college enrollment dropped 8% from 2019 to 2022, the **steepest decline on record**, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. State support for education has been similarly declining. In the last 2 decades, public funding has **dropped** by over 30 percent in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Pennsylvania.

Most of the reporting has been about the decline in liberal arts offerings at regional public colleges. Missouri Western State University, Eastern Kentucky University, Henderson State University, Iowa State University, North Dakota State University, and Emporia State University all **reported significant financial deficits** and have all announced plans to cut back or eliminate majors including English, history, philosophy, sociology, political science, art and other subjects. Even flagship universities are being

affected. The University of Alaska is eliminating 39 majors, including chemistry and earth science. West Virginia University is discussing eliminating all three of its fine-arts schools and eight departments in the College of Arts and Science, including English, philosophy, world languages, and women's studies. The University of Vermont is considering eliminating 12 majors including geology, religion, and some foreign language majors. [Note: Adam White, UVM's Director of University Communications wrote to Forbes after publication: "That is factually incorrect. The truth is that UVM this year renewed its commitment to these subjects with the launch of its new School of World Languages and Cultures"]

Private colleges, particularly smaller, less selective colleges, are similarly planning cuts. [McDaniel College](#) suspended five majors and two minors. Lasell University [announced last week](#) that it will eliminate five liberal-arts majors including English and history. The College of Saint Rose will [eliminate 16 majors and six master's degrees](#). Marymount University, a Catholic institution in Northern Virginia, [decided in February](#) to phase out history and English majors. St. Mary's University of Minnesota made a [similar announcement](#) last year, including dropping Actuarial Science, Art, English, History, Human Services, International Business, Music, Music Industry, Spanish, Theatre and Theology.

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Some cuts, particularly at rural institutions, have been supported for political reasons. Max McCoy, a professor at Emporia State University in Kansas [notes](#) that colleges are “taking the brunt of it because of the influence of rural politicians, and especially extreme politicians who are advancing an idea that education is a threat.” Dr. David Whalen, the Associate Vice President for Curriculum and Professor of English at Hillsdale College, told [Fox News](#) that “Students find that their study of literature inevitably turns into either an exploration of the arcane theoretical interests of the professor or the high school teacher, or more commonly now, an indulgence in a kind of ideological or politicized study of grievance.” Calling numerous social science and humanities degree programs “indoctrination factories,” [Mississippi’s auditor](#) says the state should drop taxpayer funding for “useless degrees” in “garbage fields” like Urban Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, German Literature, African American Studies, Gender Studies and Women’s Studies.

Even highly selective colleges are seeing a reduction in students majoring in the liberal arts. [In 2022](#), only seven per cent of Harvard freshmen planned to major in the humanities, down from twenty

per cent in 2012, and nearly thirty per cent during the nineteen-seventies. [Stanford](#) saw a 14 percent drop in humanities majors at the university over the past decade.

Things are not all gloom and doom for the liberal arts. Highly selective liberal arts colleges, from Amherst and Swarthmore to Pomona and Vassar are seeing increasing numbers of students seeking admission. Despite the reduction in liberal arts majors, Stanford is seeing a trend shared by many of their peer institutions. Over the past decade, they have seen a 20 percent *increase* in enrollment in humanities courses.

Much of the chagrin over declining liberal arts offerings has been about students not developing so-called [soft skills](#), including developing leadership, problem solving, creativity, integrity, teamwork, maintaining relationships, and taking initiative. Sarah Mustillo, dean of the College of Arts and Letters at Notre Dame University, commented that the liberal arts promote "critical thinking, articulate speaking, writing well, empathy, and being able to work in groups and in diverse teams."

The solution for many colleges has been to infuse soft skills into technical courses. Steven Mintz, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, [comments](#) in *Inside Higher Education* that colleges have multiple ways to achieve this. He recommends:

- Making the lower-division experience more integrated and connected by creating course clusters that address big problems from multiple disciplinary perspectives.
- Promoting active learning, inquiry and problem, team, and project-based learning.

- Integrating moral reasoning, community-based learning and community service into the curriculum.
- Expanding co-op and internship experiences and introducing courses that seek to bridge the divide between the liberal arts and professional education, and
- “Making social-emotional growth — a growth mind-set, self-efficacy and self-regulation, metacognitive abilities, grit, empathy, and resilience, a criteria for all courses offered.

Colleges are developing majors and courses which bridge the liberal arts and technical fields. **New blended majors**, such as “immersive media design,” are bridging technology and humanities. Jeffrey Schnapp **founded** the Stanford Humanities Lab, in part to apply computational techniques to literary and historical study. He created a similar program at Harvard, metaLAB, with projects such as envisioning the future of libraries or infusing software with values from the humanities.

The liberal arts are not disappearing, they are simply changing. At community colleges there has actually been a marked increase in the number of liberal arts and humanities majors. The number of associate degrees in these fields **grew by 88 percent**—from 218,000 to 410,000—between 2000 and 2015. Most colleges continue to require a liberal arts core curriculum for their students. There is **ample evidence** that despite the reduction of *majors* in the liberal arts and humanities, students are continuing to take liberal arts courses with 75% of courses that are not part of their majors.

The liberal arts and humanities are great for students who will read and engage in the primary source materials being studied. Students **who thrive** in these fields seek out faculty mentors and are committed to being lifelong learners. Students who struggled to

complete classroom reading or complete assignments in high school are likely to continue this in college. Instead of pushing these students to major in the liberal arts, it is vital to infuse the skills promoted in the liberal arts into all college courses.

Colleges should graduate students who are better thinkers, speakers and writers than when they entered. This can happen as well in well-designed blended or technical courses as liberal arts courses. It is vital that we educate students where they are not where we would like them to be. Whatever avenue achieves the objectives of a liberal arts education should be what we support as a country.

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