

[KILLING THE HUMANITIES]

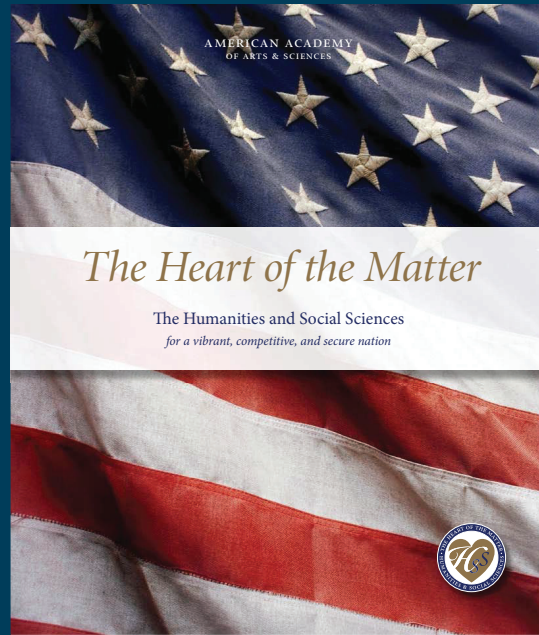
What happened to true liberal education?

In May, Harvard reported that only 20 percent of its undergraduates were majoring in the humanities, down from 36 percent in 1954. Overall, just 7.6 percent of the bachelor's degrees American colleges and universities awarded in 2010 were in the humanities.

Well, you might ask, so what? Many students (and their tuition-paying parents) would say that college is simply preparation for a career. Why not major in something that provides “real” knowledge and skills to earn a good job?

That instinct is understandable, especially with the economy still struggling and student-loan debt levels at record highs. But it may be shortsighted. Although the starting salaries for people with undergraduate professional degrees are typically higher than for humanities majors, a study by the compensation research firm PayScale shows that humanities majors catch up over time. For example, fifteen years after graduation, Classics majors earn more on average than accounting majors, and English majors outperform those who studied Web and multimedia design.

The truth is that employers are looking for the sorts of smarts and skills developed through a true liberal education. Nine out of ten employers rate written communication, critical thinking, and problem solving as “very important” for success on the job. At the same time, they say that only a *quarter* of recent college graduates are well prepared in these areas, according to a study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities.



Of course, to think of college solely as job preparation is to take an overly narrow view of the meaning and purpose of education. In *A Student's Guide to the Core Curriculum*, Mark Henrie, ISI's chief academic officer, writes, “No human life is defined completely by paid employment. *Professional man*, therefore, cannot be the true end of a university education.”

American universities once recognized this basic truth. They “required all students to take an integrated sequence of courses, a core curriculum, bringing coherence to their basic studies,” Henrie notes. “Through survey introductions to ‘the best which has been thought and said,’ the core sought to provide a comprehensive framework by which students could orient their more specialized studies and within which they could locate themselves.” But most colleges long ago stopped providing this guidance. They gave up on ensuring that

students emerged as culturally literate citizens.

Many observers are awakening to the consequences. In *The Heart of the Matter*, a widely noticed report released in the spring, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences concluded that the collapse of a true education in the humanities threatens America’s “national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the ideals we hold in common.”

The report began with a question: “Who will lead America into a bright future?” The answer: “Citizens who are educated in the broadest possible sense, so that they can participate in their own governance and engage with the world.” That means citizens who have benefited from a liberal education, not the utilitarian model so often touted today. In narrowing its educational focus, the report concluded, the United States is abandoning its “sense of what education has been and should continue to be”—as well as its “sense of what makes America great.”

Fortunately, a broad, coherent education is still within reach. Thousands of students turn to ISI precisely to get the kind of education the modern university has abandoned, one that explores Western civilization and the American experience—the history, thought, and institutions that shaped them. Now more than ever, ISI is filling in the gaps, helping students understand the principles on which American freedom and prosperity are based and, more broadly, how to make sense of the world. —THE EDITORS