

# The End of the English Major

Enrollment in the humanities is in free fall at colleges around the country. What happened?

By [Nathan Heller](#) February 27, 2023

*Since 2013, the study of English and history has dropped by a third; the number of STEM degrees, meanwhile, is soaring. Illustration by Hudson Christie*

The crisis, when it came, arrived so quickly that its scale was hard to recognize at first. From 2012 to the start of the pandemic, the number of English majors on campus at Arizona State University fell from nine hundred and fifty-three to five hundred and seventy-eight. Records indicate that the number of graduated language and literature majors decreased by roughly half, as did the number of history majors. Women's studies lost eighty per cent. "It's hard for students like me, who are pursuing an English major, to find joy in what they're doing," Meg Macias, a junior, said one afternoon as the edges of the sky over the campus went soft. It was late autumn, and the sunsets came in like flame on thin paper on the way to dusk. "They always know there's someone who wishes that they were doing something else."

A.S.U., which is centered in Tempe and has more than eighty thousand students on campus, is today regarded as a beacon for the democratic promises of public higher education. Its undergraduate admission rate is eighty-eight per cent. Nearly half its undergraduates are from minority backgrounds, and a third are the first in their families to go to college. The in-state tuition averages just four thousand dollars, yet A.S.U. has a better faculty-to-student ratio on site than U.C. Berkeley and spends more on faculty research than Princeton. For students interested in English literature, it can seem a lucky place to land. The university's tenure-track English

faculty is seventy-one strong—including eleven Shakespeare scholars, most of them of color. In 2021, A.S.U. English professors won two Pulitzer Prizes, more than any other English department in America did.

On campus, I met many students who might have been moved by these virtues but felt pulled toward other pursuits. Luiza Monti, a senior, had come to college as a well-rounded graduate of a charter school in Phoenix. She had fallen in love with Italy during a summer exchange and fantasized about Italian language and literature, but was studying business—specifically, an interdisciplinary major called Business (Language and Culture), which incorporated Italian coursework. “It’s a safeguard thing,” Monti, who wore earrings from a jewelry business founded by her mother, a Brazilian immigrant, told me. “There’s an emphasis on who is going to hire you.”

Justin Kovach, another senior, loved to write and always had. He’d blown through the thousand-odd pages of “Don Quixote” on his own (“I thought, This is a really funny story”) and looked for more big books to keep the feeling going. “I like the long, hard classics with the fancy language,” he said. Still, he wasn’t majoring in English, or any kind of literature. In college—he had started at the University of Pittsburgh—he’d moved among computer science, mathematics, and astrophysics, none of which brought him any sense of fulfillment. “Most of the time I would spend avoiding doing work,” he confessed. But he never doubted that a field in *STEM*—a common acronym for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—was the best path for him. He settled on a degree in data science.

Kovach will graduate with some thirty thousand dollars in debt, a burden that influenced his choice of a degree. For decades now, the cost of education has increased over all ahead of inflation. One theory has been that this pressure, plus the growing precariousness of the middle class, has played a role in driving students like him toward hard-skill majors. (English majors, on

average, carry less debt than students in other fields, but they take longer to pay it down.)

For the decline at A.S.U. is not anomalous. According to Robert Townsend, the co-director of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators project, which collects data uniformly but not always identically to internal enrollment figures, from 2012 to 2020 the number of graduated humanities majors at Ohio State's main campus fell by forty-six per cent. Tufts lost nearly fifty per cent of its humanities majors, and Boston University lost forty-two. Notre Dame ended up with half as many as it started with, while *SUNY* Albany lost almost three-quarters. Vassar and Bates—standard-bearing liberal-arts colleges—saw their numbers of humanities majors fall by nearly half. In 2018, the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point briefly considered eliminating thirteen majors, including English, history, and philosophy, for want of pupils.

During the past decade, the study of English and history at the collegiate level has fallen by a full third. Humanities enrollment in the United States has declined over all by seventeen per cent, Townsend found. What's going on? The trend mirrors a global one; four-fifths of countries in the Organization for Economic Coöperation reported falling humanities enrollments in the past decade. But that brings little comfort to American scholars, who have begun to wonder what it might mean to graduate a college generation with less education in the human past than any that has come before.

If you take a moment to conjure the university in your mind, you will probably arrive at one of two visions. Perhaps you see the liberal-arts idyll, removed from the pressures of the broader world and filled with tweedy creatures reading on quadrangle lawns. This is the redoubt of the idealized figure of the English major, sensitive and sweated, moving from "Pale Fire" to "The Fire Next Time" and scaling the heights of "Ulysses" for the view. The goal of

such an education isn't direct career training but cultivation of the mind—the belief that Lionel Trilling caricatured as “certain good things happen if we read literature.” This model describes one of those pursuits, like acupuncture or psychoanalysis, which seem to produce salutary effects through mechanisms that we have tried but basically failed to explain.

Or perhaps you think of the university as the research colony, filled with laboratories and conferences and peer-reviewed papers written for audiences of specialists. This is a place that thumps with the energy of a thousand gophers turning over knowledge. It's the small-bore university of campus comedy—of “Lucky Jim” and “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”—but also the quarry of deconstruction, quantum electrodynamics, and value theory. It produces new knowledge and ways of understanding that wouldn't have an opportunity to emerge anywhere else.

In 1963, Clark Kerr, the president of the University of California system, gave a series of lectures subsequently collected in a famous book, “The Uses of the University.” He argued that both of these paradigms—the former largely inspired by British schools like Oxford and Cambridge, the latter largely inspired by the great German universities of the nineteenth century—had no actual equivalent in the U.S. Instead, he said, the Americans created the “multiversity”: a kind of hodgepodge of both types and more. The multiversity incorporates the tradition of land-grant universities, established with an eye to industrial-age skill sets. And it provides something for everyone. There is pre-professional training of all sorts—law schools, business schools, medical schools, agricultural schools—but also the old liberal-arts quadrangle. “The university is so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself,” Kerr wrote.

The multiversity does have a long project, though, and that is the project of

opening itself to the world. In the nineteen-thirties, Harvard began making motions in the direction of socioeconomic meritocracy, significantly increasing scholarships for bright students. In 1944, the G.I. Bill was signed, bearing more than two million veterans into colleges and universities, the quickest jump in enrollment (male enrollment, anyway) on record. Between 1940 and 1970, the percentage of the American public that received at least four years of university education nearly tripled, sharpening the university's democratic imperative. The student ferment of these years pressed for curricular reform, with the goal of bringing the university into greater alignment with undergraduates' interests. Higher education was ever less a world apart and more a world in which many people spent some time.

For decades, the average proportion of humanities students in every class hovered around fifteen per cent nationally, following the American economy up in boom times and down in bearish periods. (If you major in a field like business for the purpose of getting rich, it doesn't follow—but can be mistaken to—that majoring in English will make you poor.) Enrollment numbers of the past decade defy these trends, however. When the economy has looked up, humanities enrollments have continued falling. When the markets have wobbled, enrollments have tumbled even more. Today, the roller coaster is in free fall. Meanwhile, in the U.S., the percentage of college degrees awarded in health sciences, medical sciences, natural sciences, and engineering has shot up. At Columbia University—one of a diminishing number of schools with a humanities-heavy core requirement—English majors fell from ten per cent to five per cent of graduates between 2002 and 2020, while the ranks of computer-science majors strengthened.

“Until about four years ago, I thought it was a reversible situation—that those who profess the humanities hadn't been good enough at selling them to students,” James Shapiro, an English professor at Columbia, told me in his office one day. He had worried his graying blond hair to a choppy peak.

Photographs of Shakespeare productions he has worked on were perched among the books on his shelves, which were close-packed. "I no longer believe that, for two reasons."

*"He's not accustomed to having insults hurled back at him."*

*Cartoon by Frank Cotham*

One reason was the way of the world. Shapiro picked up an abused-looking iPhone from his desk. "You're talking to someone who has only owned a smartphone for a year—I resisted," he said. Then he saw that it was futile. "Technology in the last twenty years has changed all of us," he went on. "How has it changed me? I probably read five novels a month until the two-thousands. If I read one a month now, it's a lot. That's not because I've lost interest in fiction. It's because I'm reading a hundred Web sites. I'm listening to podcasts." He wagged the iPhone disdainfully. "Go to a play now, and watch the flashing screens an hour in, as people who like to think of themselves as cultured cannot! Stop! Themselves!" Assigning "Middlemarch" in that climate was like trying to land a 747 on a small rural airstrip.

The other reason was money. Shapiro put down the phone and glowered at it. "You get what you pay for!" he said, and grabbed a departmental memo that lay on his desk. With a blunt pencil, he scribbled on the back a graph with two axes and an upside-down parabola. "I'm talking about the *big fire hose*."

As I watched, he labelled the start of the graph "1958"—the year after the Soviets launched Sputnik, when the National Defense Education Act appropriated more than a billion dollars for education.

"We're not talking about elite universities—we're talking about money flowing into fifty states, all the way down. That was the beginning of the glory days

of the humanities," he continued. Near the plummeting end of the parabola, he scribbled "2007," the beginning of the economic crisis. "That funding goes down," he explained. "The financial support for the humanities is gone on a national level, on a state level, at the university level."

Shapiro smoothed out his graph, regarded it for a moment, and ran the tip of his pencil back and forth across the curve.

"This is also the decline-of-democracy chart," he said. He looked up and met my gaze. "You can overlay it on the money chart like a kind of palimpsest—it's the same."

At the high point of autumn—midterm season—I travelled to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to spend time among the golden kids of Harvard. Last year, the college reportedly had a 3.19-per-cent admission rate. Those who make it through the needle's eye are able to evade a lot of the forces thought to drag humanities enrollments down. Harvard's financial-aid packages are ostensibly doled out to the full extent needed, and built without loans, giving students who receive aid the chance to graduate debt-free. Basic employability is assured by the diploma: even a Harvard graduate who majors in somersaults will be able to find some kind of job to pay the bills. In theory, this should be a school where the range of possibilities for college remains intact.

In 2022, though, a survey found that 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. From fifteen years ago to the start of the pandemic, the number of Harvard English majors reportedly declined by about three-quarters—in 2020, there were fewer than sixty at a college of more than seven thousand—and philosophy and foreign literatures also sustained losses. (For bureaucratic reasons,

Harvard doesn't count history as a humanity, but the trend holds.) "We feel we're on the Titanic," a senior professor in the English department told me.

Students lacked a strong sense of the department's vaunted standing. "I would never say this to any of my English- or my film-major friends, but I kind of thought that those majors were a *joke*," Isabel Mehta, a junior, told me. "I thought, I'm a writer, but I'll never be an English major." Instead, she'd pursued social studies—a philosophy, politics, and economics track whose popularity has exploded in recent years. (Policy, students explained, was thought to effect urgent change.) But the conversations bored her (students said "the same three things," she reported, "and I didn't want to be around all these classmates railing on capitalism all day"), so she landed uneasily in English after all. "I have a warped sense of identity, where I'm studying something really far removed from what a lot of people here view as central, but I'm not removed from these cultural forces," she told me.

English professors find the turn particularly baffling now: a moment when, by most appearances, the appetite for public contemplation of language, identity, historiography, and other longtime concerns of the seminar table is at a peak.

"Young people are very, very concerned about the ethics of representation, of cultural interaction—all these kinds of things that, actually, we think about a lot!" Amanda Claybaugh, Harvard's dean of undergraduate education and an English professor, told me last fall. She was one of several teachers who described an orientation toward the present, to the extent that many students lost their bearings in the past. "The last time I taught 'The Scarlet Letter,' I discovered that my students were really struggling to understand the sentences as sentences—like, having trouble identifying the subject and the verb," she said. "Their capacities are different, and the nineteenth century is a long time ago."



Tara K. Menon, a junior professor who joined the English faculty in 2021, linked the shift to students arriving at college with a sense that the unenlightened past had nothing left to teach. At Harvard, as elsewhere, courses that can be seen to approach an idea of canon, such as Humanities 10, an intensive, application-only survey, have been the focus of student concerns about too few Black artists in syllabi, or Eurocentric biases.

"There's a real misunderstanding that you can come in and say, 'I want to read post-colonial texts—that's the thing I want to study—and I have no interest in studying the work of dead white men,' " Menon said. "My answer, in the big first lecture that I give, is, If you want to understand Arundhati Roy, or Salman Rushdie, or Zadie Smith, you have to read Dickens. Because one of the tragedies of the British Empire"—she smiled—"is that all those writers read all those books."

For families recently arrived in the U.S., however, literary study is not always the most urgent priority. One evening, I met a student who graduated from Harvard in 2021 with a degree in molecular and cellular biology and a minor in linguistics. Like Justin Kovach, she described herself as an avid student of literature who never considered studying it in depth.

"My parents, who were low-income and immigrants, instilled in me the very great importance of finding a concentration that would get me a job—'You don't go to Harvard for basket weaving' was one of the things they would say," she told me. She was a member of the first generation in her family to attend college—the sort of student that elite schools are at pains to enroll. "So, when I came, I took a course that was, like, the hardest course you could take your freshman year. It integrated computer science, physics, math, chemistry, and biology. That course fulfilled a lot of the requirements to be able to do molecular and cellular biology, so I finished that, for my parents. I can get a job. I'm *educated*!"

She paused, then added, "I took courses in Chinese film and literature. I took classes in the science of cooking. My issue as a first-gen student is I always view humanities as a passion project. You have to be affluent in order to be able to take that on and state, 'Oh, I can pursue this, because I have the money to do whatever I want.' " Nice work if you can get it. "I view the humanities as very hobby-based," she said.

One misty afternoon, a Harvard junior named Henry Haimo took me for a walk down Dunster Street, and on past Harvard's red-brick upperclass dorms. Haimo had assumed the style of an ageless Ivy Leaguer: glasses, a button-down, and an annihilated pair of chinos. He decided to major in history after flirting with philosophy. "There's an incredible emphasis on 'ethics' in every field of study now," he explained: A.I. plus ethics, biology plus ethics. "And effective altruism"—a practice that calls for acquiring wealth and disseminating it according to principles of optimization and efficiency—"is a *huge* trend on campus, seeping into everything. It has probably contributed to a good number of concentrators and secondaries in the philosophy department."

I asked Haimo whether there seemed to be a dominant vernacular at Harvard. (When I was a student there, people talked a lot about things being "reified.") Haimo told me that there was: the language of statistics. One of the leading courses at Harvard now is introductory statistics, enrolling some seven hundred students a semester, up from ninety in 2005. "Even if I'm in the humanities, and giving my impression of something, somebody might point out to me, 'Well, who was your sample? How are you gathering your data?' " he said. "I mean, statistics is everywhere. It's part of any good critical analysis of things."

It struck me that I knew at once what Haimo meant: on social media, and in the press that sends data visualizations skittering across it, statistics *is* now

everywhere, our language for exchanging knowledge. Today, a quantitative idea of rigor underlies even a lot of arguments about the humanities' special value. Last school year, Spencer Glassman, a history major, argued in a column for the student paper that Harvard's humanities "need to be more rigorous," because they set no standards comparable to the "tangible things that any student who completes Stat 110 or Physics 16 must know." He told me, "One could easily walk away with an A or A-minus and not have learned anything. All the *STEM* concentrators have this attitude that humanities are a joke."

Another of my student correspondents sent me a viral TikTok post in which a fit young woman wearing short shorts sprinkler-danced around her dorm room while the song "Twerkulator" played and *STEM*-tastic slogans flashed across the screen. "Do I like studying science or does it just fuel my god complex?" one read. "Am I smart or was I just at a high reading level in elementary school?" Equivalent humanities TikToks had a different energy. "I want to read philosophy while listening to classical music with my glasses on my head," one Harvard TikTok-er for the humanistic cause enthused.

Haimo and I turned back toward Harvard Square. "I think the problem for the humanities is you can feel like you're not really going anywhere, and that's very scary," he said. "You write one essay better than the other from one semester to the next. That's not the same as, you know, being able to solve this economics problem, or code this thing, or do policy analysis." This has always been true, but students now recognized less of the long-term value of writing better or thinking more deeply than they previously had. Last summer, Haimo worked at the HistoryMakers, an organization building an archive of African American oral history. He said, "When I was applying, I kept thinking, What qualifies me for this job? Sure, I can research, I can write things." He leaned forward to check for passing traffic. "But those skills are very difficult to demonstrate, and it's frankly not what the world at large

seems in demand of."

The assistant professor Brandi Adams's English 206: Introduction to Literary Studies met in one of A.S.U.'s biology buildings. "It looks like a closet door," she told me when giving directions to the classroom. When I slipped in one morning, Adams—salt-and-pepper hair worn in a high bun, glasses with translucent frames gradually drifting down her nose—was surveying her students about the course syllabus.

"We read 'Beowulf.' We read 'Tears of the Trufflepig,' by Fernando Flores. We read 'The Roman Actor,' by Philip Massinger. We read sonnets by Shakespeare, Thomas Wyatt, Terrance Hayes, and Billy Collins," she said.

"We read 'Persuasion,' we read 'Passing,' we read Victoria Chang's *banger* poems 'Mr. Darcy' and 'Edward Hopper's Office at Night,' and we read 'Uses of Literature,' by Rita Felski. We also watched the 'Persuasion' and 'Passing' Netflix adaptations." She looked at the group: nine students in the room, two remote, appearing on an A.V. system. "It has given me the opportunity to think about what we did and didn't like. I think I might remove 'Persuasion.' What do you think? Keep it or ditch it?"

"I say ditch," a student said.

"Should I substitute another Jane Austen novel?" Adams asked.

*Cartoon by Liana Finck*

"I liked 'Pride and Prejudice,' " a student offered.

"So everyone's just, like, You picked the wrong one?" Adams asked. She shrugged. " 'Persuasion' is gone."

Her approach reflects a wider effort at A.S.U. to meet students in their

interests. "Instead of a teacher telling you why it might be relevant, but there doesn't seem to be any connection to your lived experience, I think it's important to have every model of learning available to every student," Jeffrey Cohen, a butter-voiced, bearded man who has been the dean of the humanities at A.S.U. since 2018, told me. On taking the position, he hired a marketing firm, Fervor, to sell the humanities better. It ran a market survey of eight hundred and twenty-six students.

"It was eye-opening to see their responses," Cohen said. "In general, they loved the humanities and rated them higher than their other courses. However, they were unclear on what the humanities were—two hundred and twenty-two thought that biology was a humanity."

The students also had no idea which careers humanities study led to, so Cohen decided to teach a course called Making a Career with a Humanities Major. "One of the things the students do is choose a famous humanities major and write about that person," he said. "Many students are first-generation and bringing the weight of their family tradition with them to the classroom. If they know that someone like John Legend studied literature and made a really great career, they're, like, 'O.K.!' " His office keeps a growing list of famous people and pushes it, by e-mail, during the period when students sign up for their courses.

In a quantitative society for which optimization—getting the most output from your input—has become a self-evident good, universities prize actions that shift numbers, and pre-professionalism lends itself to traceable change. In 2019, two deans at Emory, Michael A. Elliott and Douglas A. Hicks, received a \$1.25-million grant from the Mellon Foundation to create what they called the Humanities Pathways program, focussed on career preparedness. ("Faculty learn to integrate into their syllabi elements to make students conscious that what they're learning will help them with what

potential employers are looking for," Peter Höyng, a German-studies professor who co-directs the program, told me.) It arranges Zoom seminars with alumni to help show the way. Almost immediately, the program's co-creators were plucked up into bigger roles: last year, Elliott became the president of Amherst College, and Hicks is now the president of Davidson.

"When I was a graduate student, in the nineties, the *New York Times* ran a series of magazine stories about major literary theorists, because they were seen as being central," Elliott told me from his new office. "Now they would be about people working in artificial intelligence or natural-language processing." Students have noticed the change of focus. "They like being part of vibrant debate and discussion—it's one reason we continue to see strong enrollments around Black studies," Elliott said.

At A.S.U., the English department has been wondering whether even to keep calling itself the English department. "More and more students come to the discipline not necessarily to take courses in literature," Devoney Looser, a professor and an Austen scholar, told me. They're curious about creative writing, or media studies, or they follow other beacons. A few hundred yards from the department's building, which has only two classrooms of its own, looms the business complex—two wings with terrazzo floors, sky bridges, fountains, and wall placards that say things such as "*Vision: We transform the world*"—and comparisons are hard to avoid. " 'Branding' makes a lot of people uncomfortable, and English professors are not typically a group that embraces the marketplace," Looser said. "But this is a moment where we might be in a position to reimagine ourselves."

Some humanities departments at A.S.U. have gathered into schools of loose affiliation, following a fashion for "unbundling," or breaking departmental barriers to let students mold study to their needs. "The idealistic part is: Can we reach people who might otherwise not get any higher education? The

vulgar part is: Can we monetize the bits and pieces?" Catherine O'Donnell, a history professor, said. "Everyone is going to be hoisted on this petard, because, as we instrumentalize higher education, students question the whole bundling of a B.A.: Is a college education 'worth' it? Is a humanities degree 'worth' it? The humanities are going to be the little bird on the hippo"—an afterthought trying to balance on other educational goals.

For many students, the humanities already are the little bird. Tiffany Harmanian, a senior at A.S.U., is premed, with a neuroscience major ("I come from a family of doctors—I'm Middle Eastern!" she told me), but minors in English and founded a student organization called the Medical Humanities Society. Growing up, she lived in novels and poetry. But it hadn't occurred to her to go all in as an English major while being premed. "People involved in the humanities may not even need to go to school for what they're wanting to do," she said; she didn't see what studying "The Waste Land" had to do with making it as a poet. "Also, because of the world we're living in, there's this desperation for being able to make money at a young age and retire at a young age," she added.

I asked her what she meant.

"A lot of it has to do with us seeing—they call them 'influencers' online," Harmanian said, pronouncing the word slowly for my benefit. "I'm twenty-one. People my age have crypto. People have agents working on their banking and trading. Instead of working nine to five for your fifteen-dollar minimum wage, you can value your time." She and her peers had grown up in an age that saw the lie in working for the Man, so they were charging out on their own terms. "It's because our generation is a lot more progressive in our thinking," she told me.

For years in the United States, high culture—or, more precisely, the idea of

high culture—was kept aloft with help from Cold War coffers. During the fifties and sixties, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a C.I.A.-backed anti-Communist organization, notoriously funded literary and ideas magazines with sympathetic allegiances. Other ventures were less direct. Beginning in the forties, the U.S. government mounted exhibitions of American art, and the State Department later bankrolled jazz tours overseas. The idea was: they don't swing in Sovetsk.

It is hard to separate the effects of support for cultural endeavors from the effects of increasingly widespread college education. But, for years, there was little reason to. Through the second half of the twentieth century, the opening up of the university to the outside world and the work valued in that world aligned. Being able to appreciate a Thelonious Monk record or a Miller play or the wild sprawl of a Pynchon novel was a widely held objective. The concept of "the canon" is a mirage—there's no single list handed down from the mountain—but the idea of shared knowledge of challenging art is powerful, and by mid-century it had been framed as a route to upward mobility. The French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron coined the term "cultural capital" to define the inherited or acquired cultural knowledge that makes movement and advancement easier in a field of society, and by the sixties, in America, that kind of wealth was newly open for the claiming. In 1962, Nichols and May, the aspirational university-humor act, performed for President Kennedy alongside Marilyn Monroe. In 1964, "My Fair Lady"—a verbally dense musical of transformation through upward acculturation—grossed several times as much in cinemas as "A Hard Day's Night."

In other contexts, though, the government's investments could be seen as having backfired. Most institutional-opposition movements of the past sixty years, from Vietnam protest to today's defund-the-police efforts, have been amplified on campuses. That's partly because fields like literature and



history teach close, fact-based study and critical analysis with the goal of pulling up the rug to understand what's going on beneath. When students graduate and seek changes in broader society, they carry those practices with them. If they're young, their language is still the current language of the university, so the causes bounce back to professors and students at a convivial angle. That feedback loop is partly how youth movements grow.

Some scholars observe that, in classrooms today, the initial gesture of criticism can seem to carry more prestige than the long pursuit of understanding. One literature professor and critic at Harvard—not old or white or male—noticed that it had become more publicly rewarding for students to critique something as “problematic” than to grapple with what the problems might be; they seemed to have found that merely naming concerns had more value, in today's cultural marketplace, than curiosity about what underlay them. This clay-pigeon approach to inquiry struck her as a devaluation of all that criticism—and art—can do.

Others, though, suggest that the humanities' loss of cultural capital has been hastened by the path of humanities scholarship itself. One theory is that the critical practices have become too specialized. Once, in college, you might have studied “Mansfield Park” by looking closely at its form, references, style, and special marks of authorial genius—the way Vladimir Nabokov famously taught the novel, and an intensification of the way a reader on the subway experiences the book. Now you might write a paper about how the text enacts a tension by both constructing and subtly undermining the imperial patriarchy through its descriptions of landscape. What does this have to do with how most humans read? Rita Felski, whose book “Uses of Literature” is studied in Adams's A.S.U. class, has argued that the professional practice of scholarship has become self-defeatingly disdainful of moving literary encounters. “In retrospect, much of the grand theory of the last three decades now looks like the last gasp of an Enlightenment

tradition of *rois philosophes* persuaded that the realm of speculative thought would absolve them of the shameful ordinariness of a messy, mundane, error-prone existence," she wrote. "Contemporary critics pride themselves on their power to disenchant." The disenchantment, at least, has reached students. When I was in college—not terribly long ago—a life in letters seemed one of the lower ridges of Olympus. Speaking from a sample size of one, I can report that a shift in perception is noticeable. At Harvard and A.S.U., several students inquired with furrowed brow about my prospects, whether I was going to be O.K. Especially after years of grim stories about publishing, the shine has come off.

Bring back the awe, some say, and students will follow. "In my department, the author is very much alive!" Robert Faggen, a Robert Frost scholar and a longtime literature professor at Claremont McKenna, told me, to account for the still healthy enrollment he sees there. (There are institutional outliers to the recent trend of enrollment decline; the most prominent is U.C. Berkeley.) "We are very concerned with the beauty of things, with aesthetics, and ultimately with judgment about the value of works of art. I think there *is* a hunger among students for the thrill that comes from truth and beauty."

If this is so, the trail to studying truth and beauty must still be blazed; it can't come from walking backward. That's challenging, many scholars worry, without the national mandate that the humanities had fifty years ago. "My big beef with the Obamas was that every sentence out of their mouth was *STEM, STEM, STEM, STEM*—and then the arts, nothing in between," Ayanna Thompson, a Shakespeare scholar who directs A.S.U.'s Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and the RaceB4Race conference series, told me. "We never heard anything from Trump, and we're not hearing anything from Biden, either."

One afternoon, I walked across the Charles River, past the Harvard Business

School, to Western Avenue, where, two years ago, the university opened a five-hundred-and-forty-four-thousand-square-foot Science and Engineering Complex, which reportedly cost a billion dollars. Just inside the entrance, an enormous painted wall display read "*OUR RESEARCH: TACKLING SOCIETAL CHALLENGES.*" Placards noted that the complex, in the spirit of the Ark, could "maintain critical research activities" during the grid loss and floods of a hundred-year storm. I tapped a jumbo touch screen on a wall, and a keyboard appeared, offering directions. I passed a digital triptych by the art collective *BREAKFAST*, and hundreds of magnetic disks traced my profile in a sequinlike cascade of mirrored light.

The new complex houses Harvard's engineering, bioengineering, computer-science, and data-science departments. In the basic sense, it was conceived in 1997, when the university announced the acquisition of fifty-two acres of land in the Boston neighborhood of Allston. But it wasn't until after Larry Summers became president, in 2001, that a vision for that land was made public.

Summers imagined "the next Silicon Valley, with all that it means and all that it brings," with an emphasis on industrial opportunities for biomedical research. In "Beyond the Ivory Tower" (1982), Derek Bok, Harvard's president through the seventies and eighties, had warned about "commercial ventures" posing "dangers for the quality of research and even for the intellectual integrity of the university itself." At the time, such doubts prevailed. When, in 1980, the gene-transcription pioneer Mark Ptashne was induced to launch a bioengineering company from his professorship, storm clouds rose around him. Summers's appointment—like A.S.U.'s presidential appointment, the following year, of the tech-policy specialist Michael Crow—signalled an openness to business with the new global private sector. In 2004, Harvard hired a "chief technology development officer" to aid in the commercialization of research. In 2010, Xi Jinping withdrew his only child

from college in China and enrolled her at Harvard—a gesture that affirmed the university’s arrival as a hub of Swiss disinterest on the byways of industrial diplomacy. In 2012, Harvard and M.I.T. founded edX, which markets branded courses online. The university promotes its Science and Engineering Complex as the “most significant new building constructed by Harvard in a generation.”

That was certainly the impression I got as I walked through the complex’s eight floors and open hallways, arranged around a central vault. The materials and the color palette suggested the space station in “2001.” The ground floor, flecked with vivid-red Fritz Hansen swan chairs, comprised classrooms, a state-of-the-art auditorium, and a workshop of whizbangs and doodads called the Makerspace. Up some floating staircases, a landing was arrayed with Ping-Pong and foosball tables and a snugger of orange Knoll womb chairs. One floor up from that, half a dozen Peloton bikes faced a giant window overlooking a bioscience mural by the artist Sophy Tuttle. I didn’t climb aboard and pedal in my jeans, as must have been the hope, in part because I felt quite exercised already. Wandering the building’s hallways, a proud dean told *Harvard Magazine*, is a six-mile walk.

On the top floor, I passed a student and a professor in a hoodie talking about job placement at Toyota. I visited the complex’s library, filled with volumes such as “The Metaverse: And How It Will Revolutionize Everything.” Nearby, a row of large booths containing desks were hung with yellow curtains ready to be whisked across for privacy, like the partitions in a massage parlor. Sleek glass whiteboards lined the common spaces, and the labs were glass-walled, too, affording passersby like me a glimpse of dummy torsos draped in bionic garments, and prototypes for “a colony of robotic bees.” I followed a gaggle of *STEM* students to the ample gardens. As a soft drizzle began to fall, I got on a zero-emissions shuttle blaring the Talking Heads song “Wild Wild Life” and took a rollicking ride back to Harvard Square. In school, I had

been friendly to the sciences, but I had majored in the humanities, and since then I'd never had a moment's real regret. After half an hour in this new complex, I was prepared to do it all again and choose the interesting, vivifying life path of an engineer.

Students pick up on the emphasis. At the point when, in 1996, the university opened a refurbished humanities building, humanities enrollment was rising; now a new mandate is clear. "Harvard is spending a huge amount of money on the engineering school," a sophomore mechanical-engineering major said at dinner in the dorms one evening. It was curry night in Pforzheimer House, and a dozen students were chatting at a long table, finishing their meals. "Mark Zuckerberg just gave another half billion dollars for an A.I. and natural-intelligence research institute, and they added new professorships. The money at Harvard—and a lot of other universities, too—is disproportionately going into *STEM*." According to the *Harvard Crimson*, which conducts an annual survey, more than sixty per cent of the members of the class of 2020 planning to enter the workforce were going into tech, finance, or consulting.

"I think that the presence of big tech and consulting firms on campus is a big part of people's perception that you can't get a job in the humanities," Hana, a senior in integrative biology, chimed in at the table. "Google, Facebook, Deloitte, B.C.G. . . ." She shrugged in exasperation. "They just have access to our campus in a really pervasive way!" The first time she was buttonholed by a consulting firm was freshman year.

*"Do you have a reservation, or do you want to stand in the corner and stare daggers at me for two hours?"*

*Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen*

And the humanities' desperate efforts to compete, Hana added, merely ceded the terms. "I remember being excited about taking a Folklore & Mythology class," she said. "But the people in the department were

marketing it, saying, 'Oh, well, you know, consulting is just 'telling a story'— and we have people who study Folk & Myth going into . . . consulting!"

For some, the idea that if the prevailing interests can't be beaten they can be joined is the natural next step in opening up the university. In a bank-gray administrative building called University Hall one morning, Harvard's dean of arts and humanities, Robin Kelsey, an art historian with a tidy tam of silvery hair, told me that his hope was to "disaggregate what departments do" to match students' interests in the world beyond the gates. "Our departmental structure formed between 1890 and 1968," he said. Since then, nothing had changed in departments, even as big changes were under way in life. Outside the window, twin lampposts carried banner portraits of alumnae in the sciences. "*IMPACT*," one said. "*INNOVATION*," said the other.

One idea about the national enrollment problem is that it's actually a counting problem: students haven't so much left the building as come in through another door. Adjacent fields aren't included in humanities tallies, and some of them are booming. Harvard's history-of-science department has seen a fifty-per-cent increase in its majors in the past five years. The humanities creature who recites Cavafy at parties might fade away, but students are still getting their vitamins. There's a lot of ethics in bioethics, after all.

Echoing the work at A.S.U., Kelsey regards the drifting of humanities skills into other fields as the way of the future. (This mixing has a pecuniary benefit, too: humanities deans like Kelsey and Cohen rarely have first crack at big donations, so nesting their divisions' doings in the sciences and the social sciences can help with funding.) Instead of determining majors by how professors organize themselves, why not also match majors to topics that resonate in the current moment, like climate change and racial justice? I wondered aloud whether that was a moving target—the concerns in our

headlines today are different from those fifteen years ago—but Kelsey insisted that some causes were here to stay. “I would like to see us come out with better platforms for studying the environmental humanities, migration and ethnicity, and the medical humanities,” he said.

And the techie-fuzzy collaborations have good models. One afternoon, I visited the chair of Harvard’s comparative-literature department, Jeffrey Schnapp, who is involved in Kelsey’s disaggregation. Schnapp, a shaved-headed man with a trim gray Vandyke and two small rings in his left ear, sat me at a round table in an office filled with industrial-design artifacts. “I always thought that the models of the humanities that we inherited were open for expansion and innovation,” he said. Behind him, in a corner, lay several trophies from his years racing motorcycles on the West Coast.

Schnapp was a Dante scholar and, as a young professor, had helped lead the Dartmouth Dante Project, a vast textual database that was an early triumph of the so-called digital humanities. At Stanford, where he taught from 1985 to 2009, he founded the Stanford Humanities Lab, in part to apply computational techniques to literary and historical study. When Harvard brought him East, he founded a version of it called metaLAB—a project that he saw as true to his scholarly origins. “Medieval literary culture was not ‘literary’ in the way that we understood it in the nineteenth century, when printing became an industry. It was polychrome,” Schnapp said.

To show what he meant, he picked up a brightly colored paperback, which he co-wrote, called “The Electric Information Age Book.” “This is a book on the history of experimental paperbacks, like Marshall McLuhan’s ‘The Medium Is the Massage,’ ” he said, and leafed through, revealing pages of wild typefaces and pictures. Another volume he had co-written used “little microsessays connected to the future of libraries and library furnishings,” and was published with a deck of playing cards. “ ‘Making’ can mean writing

books, but it can also involve other forms, such as building software platforms infused with values from the humanities," he said, and flipped over the bottom card.

To fund metaLAB, Schnapp has had to be strategic about adapting projects to what he called "research incentives"—though the techie cast of his work helped. "There's no commensurability of scale between the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities," he said. They weren't even close. "A friend of mine likes to point out that the total budget of the N.E.H. is the same budget as just the Vienna State Opera."

In 1980, on average, state funding accounted for seventy-nine per cent of public universities' revenue. By 2019, that figure was fifty-five per cent, and governors such as Ron DeSantis, in Florida, are applying new pressure for funding cuts. Confronted with those shortfalls, public universities have two options. They can strip down academics, and face what that diminishment leads to. Or they can run to the market and surf its waves.

Because the state of Arizona cut higher-education funding by more than half between 2008 and 2019, A.S.U. has gone the market route. It invested in its online education, which gained prestige when the school figured out how to give remote students credited laboratory time. (The solution was a system of intensive camps designed by Ara Austin, an assistant professor who took college courses online after a traffic accident and later chafed at such programs' second-tier, cash-cow status.) Diplomas are the same whether earned online or on site, and the extra tuition, plus donor funds, fills A.S.U.'s sails. In 2007, the university received twenty-eight per cent of its operating budget from the state; last year, it was only nine per cent, for a budget of \$4.6 billion. "We are operating in full enterprise modality," the president, Michael Crow, announced. To put it differently: many of the greatest American public universities increasingly run as private businesses.



A side effect of A.S.U.'s remote-learning boom has been improvement in its humanities numbers. On paper, the number of English majors at A.S.U. has grown, even as the number of students in English classrooms has dropped. Several professors insisted to me that they really, truly felt no preference for online or on-site students—but that they did notice a difference in the demographics of who showed up onscreen.

“These are people in their thirties and forties who have been stay-at-home parents, or they work. And they are *committed* to the humanities—they have an idea about the value of liberal-arts education,” Ayanna Thompson, the A.S.U. English professor, told me. Partly, it was a cohort thing, given that the older students represent the views of older generations. But it was also a matter of life experience. The university has a partnership with Starbucks, which pays for its baristas to earn bachelor’s degrees online (a recruitment tool for the coffee company and a revenue source for the school), and what someone who has been in the grind of life wants to learn most isn’t necessarily linear algebra.

“Personally, I love my English major, and it really bums me out when ninety per cent of the people I talk to have input that’s negative!” McKenna Nelson, who enrolled remotely at A.S.U. while working at a Starbucks in Southern California, said. “I don’t think life should revolve around money—I’d rather go to work happy.” (She wants to teach.)

Surprisingly, many in the future biz concur. A funny thing about the market mentality, they note, is that it knows only what’s judged to have future value right now. Career studies have shown that humanities majors, with their communication and analytical skills, often end up in leadership jobs. To that extent, the value of the educated human touch is likely to hold in a storm of technological and cultural change.

"Imagine if you had a voice assistant that could write code for you, and you said, 'Hey, Alexa, build me a Web site to sell shoes,' " Sanjay Sarma, a professor of mechanical engineering at M.I.T., told me on the phone. (Immediately, he pulled the receiver away to rebuff a device in the room: "Shut up, Alexa! No! No!") "That's already happening. It's called 'low-code.' " There has been much hand-wringing about ChatGPT and its ability to replicate some composition tasks. But ChatGPT can no more conceive "Mrs. Dalloway" than it can guide and people-manage an organization. Instead, A.I. can gather and order information, design experiments and processes, produce descriptive writing and mediocre craftwork, and compose basic code, and those are the careers likeliest to go into slow eclipse.

"I think the future belongs to the humanities," Sarma said.

In a fit of inspiration or desperation, the Harvard English department has started handing out tote bags with slogans such as "*currently reading*" printed on them. ("They're trying," a senior told me.) The department has set up alumni panels, and embraced change. As of this year, it is possible to receive a degree in English from Harvard without taking a course dedicated to poetry. There are plentiful offerings in creative writing—in the age of the "maker economy," the idea goes, students want to send material into the world—and forays into new media. Stephen Greenblatt, one of the highest-ranking humanities professors by the stripes and badges of the trade, told me that he'd come to think that literary students had a future somewhere other than the page.

"It happens that we do have a contemporary form of very deep absorption of the kind comparable to literary study," he said. We were sitting in his paper-piled office. "And that is long-form television. 'The Wire,' 'Breaking Bad,' 'Chernobyl'—there are dozens of these now!" He rocked back to rest his feet on the edge of his desk. "It's a *fantastic* invention."

Greenblatt popped open a green egg of Silly Putty and began to knead it vigorously. For a moment, he seemed lost in thought.

“ ‘Better Call Saul,’ ” he added.

He liked to think of Shakespeare reading “Don Quixote,” in 1612, and marvelling at this new narrative form: the novel! So it was today, with “Better Call Saul.” He wondered whether literature departments should do more with TV.

And yet the blissful English students whom I talked to—there were many—surprised me with their indifference to the things that grownups higher in the food chain said they wanted. Ashley Kim, a junior, had been an intended economics major with a falling-asleep-in-class problem. When she kept emerging happy and alert from Tara Menon’s 9 *a.m.* City Fictions course, she switched to English. “It isn’t just people trying to learn something to get a job,” she explained.

Jeffrey Kwan, a physics and mathematics major down the hall from Kim, takes one English class a semester. “I get so much out of English because it’s the professor telling you what they thought about the work, as opposed to skills you have to learn,” he said. But he would never major in it, he told me, because he felt underqualified. “I try to figure out when to insert myself into the discussion.”

Kim concurred. “When I first joined the English department, I felt seen, but I also felt, Maybe I don’t belong,” she said. She’d gone to a magnet public school in New Jersey and felt a step behind the sanguine private-school kids in knowing how to perform her interest in the classroom.

That kind of sorting is often invisible at first. “It definitely is a very specific community in the humanities,” Rebecca Cadenhead, an upperclassman from

Westchester County, told me. "People in this group are usually from the Northeast, are usually upper middle class, are usually white, honestly, and are a certain way." That way had a fashion element: chunky statement shoes (Doc Martens, Blundstones), baggy trousers (mostly Carhartt), and vintage sweaters. "There are many people of color and many low-income people in the humanities, but in general it's people with that vibe, and we all know each other."

Cadenhead started out in applied mathematics—she'd been urged toward science in high school—but ended up a philosophy major, adding African American studies for fear that "the philosophy department would not have as many nonwhite thinkers." Yet she worried that her path remained illegible outside the Blundstone circle. And, for students of color, it seemed to her, the weight of being judged less academic for studying the humanities was multiplied. "Sometimes I have a concern that when people are encountering me they might assume that I'm here because of affirmative action," she said. "A lot of people of color here at least initially gravitate towards the sciences, because they think they'll be perceived as more intelligent if they do."

*"Take one step forward if you've ever committed mutiny on a pirate ship."*

*Cartoon by Justin Sheen*

Hearing students and teachers discuss their accommodations to the new order of things reminded me of the gag in which Charlie Chaplin and a bellhop chase each other endlessly through a revolving door. Everyone agrees that the long arc of higher education must bend toward openness and democratization. And universities, in an imperfect but forward-inching way, are achieving the dream. In 1985, twenty per cent of Harvard students identified as members of a minority ethnicity (a record then); now it's more than fifty per cent. The number of entering students who are in the first generation in their families to attend college has risen to nearly twenty per

cent. International enrollment has climbed. At A.S.U., you can be a barista in rural Alabama and get part-time access to a first-rate education for cheap. The way in which diversity of experience is understood to enrich study, and in which diverse study is understood to enrich society, is a product of work done in the humanities. Harvard and A.S.U. professors to whom I spoke took pride in their institutions' democratizing feats.

It is only slightly awkward, then, that this opening of the field has nudged educational incentives away from humanities study. The students whom universities most seek are the ones likeliest to require immediate conversion of their degrees into life change. They *need* the socioeconomic elevator that college promised them. And they need it the instant they lose institutional support.

During the postwar swell of public funding for education, conveyances picked up humanities students right where their B.A. diplomas left them: they could go to graduate school, and on to a stable, rewarding career in teaching and writing; or they could leave the academy for arts-and-letters careers plainly valued by society and at least remunerative enough to sustain a modest middle-class life. Today, the academic profession of the humanities is a notoriously haywire career track, with Ph.D. programs enrolling more students than there are jobs, using them for teaching, and then, years later, sending them off with doctoral gowns and no future in the discipline. (In 2020, the Survey of Earned Doctorates found that less than half of new arts and humanities Ph.D.s graduated with a job—any job—and the odds are vanishing even with *élite* credentials: of fifteen people who began Princeton's English Ph.D. program in 2012, only two have landed on a tenure track.) Although the public-funding arc and the university-opening arc once grew in happy parallel, intensifying the value of humanistic cultural capital while expanding access to it, those curves have now crossed.

It also happens that low-access or first-generation college students are likeliest to be underrepresented in, and nudged toward, *STEM* fields. If they do wander into a humanities course when they arrive, they can feel—like Kim—that the milieu is red-shifted away from them. A telling data point here is one of the most seemingly promising. Humanities enrollment is down among bachelor's, master's, and doctoral students, but it is increasing among students seeking two-year associate's degrees. And it is increasing among high-school students taking A.P. courses. High schoolers, in fact, now take over twenty per cent more humanities A.P. tests than tests in *stem* every year. The loss of humanities numbers isn't happening in the collegiate pipeline, in other words. It is happening when these students walk through the university gates.

Robert Townsend, the co-director of the Humanities Indicators, attributed the drop-off to acceleration tracks themselves—another tool designed to help low-access students. Smart humanities-oriented kids are taking the A.P.s, or studying English or history at community college, so, by the time they make it to four-year colleges, they've placed out of humanities requirements: classes in which students often fall in love with the field. In that way, too, students whom the universities are keenest to recruit are pre-sorted away from the humanities. And, for global students, the incentives are more acute.

Sazi Bongwe, a Harvard freshman from Johannesburg, collaborated with three friends in high school during the pandemic on a magazine called *Ukuzibuza*. On arriving in Cambridge, he had to consider that the F1 visa, for international students, allows for a stay of a year in the U.S. after graduation—except for majors in a *STEM* field, in which case one year of grace becomes three. Bongwe had come to Harvard with thoughts of a humanities major. But, like several international students with whom I spoke, he worried that the choice would be naïve.

“Am I just putting myself in a position where, in four years’ time, I’m going to be earning significantly less money than people I went to school with?” he asked. For students maintaining ties to countries with struggling economies—where the dollar goes far, and where their arrival at places like Harvard or A.S.U. carries the hopes of their communities—the moral and financial calculi are more than personal.

In previous eras, these pressures were counterbalanced by investment in the culture of the humanities. Now universities increasingly depend on the markets and their short-term goals. In Harvard Square one afternoon, I met Saul Glist, a tall history-and-literature major. Glist had been drawn toward his field, he said, because in his humanities classes he felt less like a student absorbing information and more like a young thinker. If he didn’t keep seeing statistics about the humanities crisis, he’d never have known it existed, he told me.

“I think it’s really a question of what the university is investing in,” Glist said. “When you’re telling touring students, ‘This is our shiny new building that is the jewel of our expanding campus,’ and are making no visible investments in the humanities, that creates a narrative.” He believed that universities were all too happy to accept plummeting humanities enrollments, because the story of decline created its own vortex—one that drew away duties that the university, in its present pursuit of growth and revenue, might prefer not to deal with.

Some have resigned themselves. “The age of Anglophilia is over,” one late-career English professor told me. “It’s like thinking back to when Latin was the center of the world—the memorization of lines and competing with your friends at Oxford and Eton in quips.” The great age of the novel had served a cloistered, highly regionalized readership, but that, too, had changed. “I don’t think reading novels is now the only way to have a broad experience of

the varieties of human nature or the ethical problems that people face," he said.

But Glist resisted the narrative of diminishment. "The question we should be asking is not *whether* the humanities have any role in our society or the university in fifty or a hundred years!" he exclaimed. "It's what do investments in the humanities look like—and what kind of ideal future can we imagine?"

Not long ago, Justin Kovach, the A.S.U. senior studying data science, decided to apply to graduate school in literature. "It would be really cool to study English literature really specifically," he told me one afternoon. "I thought about creative writing, but I think I'd rather do literature."

At A.S.U., in the humanities division, there have been some early signs of real improvement. The number of majors on campus was slightly increasing after almost a decade of near-constant decline. Jeffrey Cohen had the pleasure of seeing his marketing campaign begin to bear fruit. "I do wonder if it's because students got more involved in humanities during *COVID*," he told me. But, just to be sure, a new interdisciplinary major would start in the fall: Culture, Technology, and Environment. "Those are the three things that young people always have on their minds," he explained.

Suzanne Bigelow, one of Brandi Adams's students in English 206, met me at a café after class one day to report on her work. She had started college as a psychology major on a volleyball scholarship, but felt lost. "I was doing an application for a Hispanic scholarship, and one of the questions was 'Where do you see yourself in ten years?' " she said. "And I was, like, I don't *know*."

Last year, she started fresh, as an English major. "My future dream career would be to be a novelist," she said, then added, "I haven't told that to



anyone yet." Her favorite novel is "Things Fall Apart," by Chinua Achebe, but recently she was reading "The Human Stain," by Philip Roth, and it inspired her to try something of her own.

"He's an amazing writer, and I feel like, How am I going to be in comparison to that?" Bigelow told me. "Which is obviously unfair, because he's one of the greatest American novelists, and who am I? Just some English major at A.S.U." She looked at me slyly, then glanced away. "But I've been practicing more by myself. And I don't know. You never know what's a possibility," she said. ♦