Capitalism is Misguiding Academia and Sinking Humanities

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Introduction

By the end of my undergraduate experience in 2024, my intimate relationship with literature made me mourn the death of what academia once was. At its inception, academia, as explained by Marrou (1982) in his analysis of the Greek Akadēmia or Academy, was an intimate, noncommercial space for brilliant minds to, in their leisure, holistically edify themselves to attain both scientific knowledge and the truth of being. Now, while modern universities still highlight the personal and societal fulfillment degrees offer, they tend to conflate their value with career feasibility. For instance, in their undergraduate admissions English major description, The Ohio State University [tOSU] leads with examples of cool paths students take, such as analyzing "Halo and other video games." They conclude, however, with "Most importantly, they [English students] are prepared to thrive in fast-paced, ever-changing professional environments" (tOSU, 2026b). Moreover, excluding, tOSU and Case Western Reserve University [CWRU], career success statistics are the first numbers that the other top 5 Ohio universities, Miami University [MU], University of Dayton [UD], and University of Cincinnati [UC], boast on their main page (*Best Colleges in Ohio*, 2026; tOSU, 2026a; CWRU, 2026; MU, 2026; UD, 2026; UC, 2026).

Evidently, both the universities' and students' prioritization of professional success is a symptom of society's materialistic perception of academia's role. In Monaghan's (2024) mixed-methods investigation into 35 students' motivations for attending a Midwestern metropolitan community college, many freshmen brought up their fear of ending up working at "McDonald's or something" for a huge portion of their life (Monaghan, 2024, Findings section). Therefore, provided that colleges are a hefty financial and time investment, especially for prospective students who look to college for professional mobility, the Humanities and STEM programs of many modern universities can be seen as two separate ships sailing to the same destination: the

ultimate return on every student's investment. In my view, both ships are bound to the wrong direction because students should pursue education as a proponent of intrinsic self-growth, not as simply a professional stepping-stone obligation. The STEM ship, nonetheless, is in better shape than the sinking humanities ship due to society's devaluation of humanistic endeavors compared to "practical" sciences.

The State of Humanities. A Sinking Ship?

Regarding STEM, the public can easily name guaranteed high-salary destinations, such as Medicine and Engineering. As for humanities, however, not only are people hard-pressed to conceptualize equally high earning destinations, but also, prospective students often must defend their choice to board the ship perceived as less likely to reach any worthwhile destination. As Raffnsøe (2024) puts it, humanities "constitute an educational 'time-out' beyond the real world that is of only limited value since it seems to add only marginal value to the real world" (p. 36). Accordingly, there are columnists, such as Donelan (2024) and Fischer (2022), who try to advocate the usefulness of the humanities by highlighting the transferable skills that they offer, as if a translation of students' skillsets is needed before graduates can enter and survive in the workplace or real world.

Putting optics aside, the question is then, "are there any financially worthwhile destinations for those aboard the Humanities ship?" This, of course, depends on which humanity majors. However, Domingo Angeles (2025) of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in his analysis of the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) of humanity field wages, generally states that the median annual salaries for humanities workers ranged from $50,000 to $68,000 compared to the $70,000 median for all other fields. With those salaries, granted that a four-year degree can cost up to $500,000 when "considering student loan interest and lost potential income," it is

seemingly impossible for humanity workers to see a timely financial return on their investment (Hanson, 2026, para. 1).

What Does Academia Have to Say About it?

When considering the current state of humanities and its future, many scholars dismantle the idea that humanity majors do not contribute to the sciences or the real world. Notably, Bod (2022) illuminates discoveries made in humanity fields that were falsely attributed to the sciences, such as the linguistic analysis of Sanskrit that shapes our current perspective on language and computer-programming. Other scholars take it a step further and call for the administrative integration of humanities and STEM. For instance, Raffnsøe (2024) claims that the humanities are not in a crisis as in a "problematic situation in which it is difficult to survive and find validation," but rather, the humanities are at a turning point in which it is crucial for scholars on both sides to "reinterpret and reposition" their knowledge to remove polarization between disciplines (pp. 40-41). Similarly, Burns (2026) argues that it is crucial for universities to integrate humanities and STEM university programs because, while the sciences are responsible for groundbreaking societal advancements, such as vaccines and nuclear technology, humanity fields must relate those advancements and their ethical implications to the public. Another scholar, Seddone (2025), argues that the humanities are especially important with today's use of Generative AI. His concern is that if we consistently let LLMs think and produce for us without considering the philosophical and ethical stakes, we will lose sight of life's answers that no artificial intelligence can supply.

Conclusion

University recruitment efforts, public perception, and dim career prospects suggest that academia as it once was, and the humanities by extension, are being misguided and sunken by society's capitalistic commodification of education. However, hope is not lost because change in not only how people see the humanities, but also how people view academia's societal role, is possible. As long as people measure the worth of degrees by their financial return, students will continue to scramble to translate their personal and spiritual gains into workplace compatibility. Moreover, as long as the humanities and sciences stay opposed to each other on separate ships, the public will continue to oversee the inherent value the humanities bring and their cruciality to the sciences. Addressing these issues is much easier said than done, but not impossible.

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