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TEACHING

# Can You Get Students Interested in the Humanities Again? These Colleges May Have It Figured Out

By Beth McMurtie | NOVEMBER 04, 2019 ✓ PREMIUM



Clay Lomneth for The Chronicle

Charles Ross, a professor of English at Purdue U., discusses Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* with his class as part of the Transformative Texts course sequence. Built around classic works, the courses are designed to engage undergraduates in ways that a traditional composition class typically does not.

Across the country, humanities majors have plummeted. Since 2011, history has seen a 33-percent drop in majors. English has seen a longer and more drastic decline, while languages, philosophy, and religion have also been hit hard since the 2008 recession.

Humanities departments have also struggled to fill introductory and intermediate courses. According to surveys by the American Historical Association, overall enrollments in history courses declined by nearly 8 percent from 2013-14 to 2016-17.

“The financial crash was the tipping point for a lot of different departments in the

humanities because it persuaded parents as well as students that a humanities degree didn't guarantee a financial future and it was a kind of luxury,” said Gary Taylor, chair of the English department at Florida State University. “Of course that's not true, that humanities degrees don't get you a job. But it's a perception. And perceptions drive decisions that people make.”

Many humanities professors can understand the allure of fields like data science and engineering. Digital skills are, after all, required in many jobs, and starting salaries in these fields are often strong.

But this existential crisis has forced humanities departments to look both outward and inward. Had they, in fact, kept their courses relevant? Had they been helping their students prepare for careers?

**“That's not true, that humanities degrees don't get you a job. But it's a perception. And**

Had they effectively conveyed the value of the humanities to a generation uncertain of its future? Many say no.

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“In history and humanities in general, we have done a really crap job of telling our story over the last 10 years,” said Heather Gumbert, an associate professor of history at Virginia Tech.

Jim Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association, said there’s a broad shift going on in history as a result of those external pressures. “It’s departments saying, ‘What are students interested in? OK, let’s teach that.’ It’s also walking across campus and talking to colleagues and saying, ‘What kinds of history courses make better engineers?’”

There are some signs that those efforts may be working. According to the most recent AHA survey, history course enrollments have stabilized.

Several departments at colleges across the nation are trying to lure more students back to the humanities. Here’s how they’re doing it.

### The Liberal-Arts Certificate

Purdue University has always been a STEM-oriented campus. But interest in the humanities has declined so precipitously in recent years that its College of Liberal Arts faced a crisis. From 2011 to 2015, the college saw a 37-percent drop in majors. English had 402 majors in 2011. Now it has 263. History dropped from 150 majors to 80.

The share of undergraduates taking humanities courses has also cratered. In 2016 only 10 percent of graduating Purdue students had taken a class in literature, and just 7 percent had taken American history.

“It felt like a ball rolling off the table,” said David Reingold, dean of the college. “If you projected this out, we would have no students by 2025.”

One goal has been to persuade more STEM-focused students to take classes in the humanities and social sciences. To that end, the college created a 15-credit-hour certificate program called Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts. It begins with a two-semester course sequence, known as Transformative Texts, that develops students’ communication and information-literacy skills. That is followed by academic work in one of five tracks: science, the environment, health care, management, or conflict resolution.

The Transformative Texts series, said Melinda Zook, a history professor and Cornerstone’s founding director, is different from the traditional rhetoric and composition courses, typically taught by graduate students, that all students take through their general-education requirements. For one, the courses are taught by some of the college’s best teachers in a

variety of disciplines, including anthropology, history, philosophy, political science, and sociology. And because they are built around classic works, the courses are designed to engage undergraduates in ways that a traditional composition class typically does not.

Students might read T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and discuss social anxiety. Or they may dive into Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and debate the notion of the perfect community. That strategy has proved to be a bridge to students who might not normally take a literature course.

"All college students love to talk about stress, anxiety, friendship, career choices, what makes me happy, or what makes my parents happy," said Zook. "All the great books are a reflection on the self. Those conversations go over really well with these students."

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When the Transformative Texts courses were rolled out, in the fall of 2018, about 1,000 students enrolled and the wait list was long. This year, Purdue doubled the number of sections. Now, about 1,800 students — or about one-quarter of the freshman class — are

enrolled.

The courses have also appealed to faculty members in the college, one-third of whom are teaching a Transformative Texts course. While they're not designed as pipelines to a major, Zook said she's aware of the power a well-designed introductory course can have on an 18-year-old. "You get in there with these 30 freshmen, and you attract them to literature or philosophy, and you tell them why you teach this," she said. "Some students major by professor."

She also likes the challenge of teaching a class in which there may be one liberal-arts major and the rest are from STEM fields. "You would never have had them in other classes," she said. "I don't do compare and contrast. I do: Pitch me a video game based on Dante's *Inferno*."

The college has worked with deans and department chairs across the campus to show them the value of the program. Some bought in immediately, noting that employers have long complained that many STEM graduates enter the work force without the ability to write or speak effectively. "Our big push is that this will tell employers you have these communication skills," said Zook. "You're not just an engineer; you're an engineer who can think on his or her feet, who can articulate a vision."

Some upper-level courses that complete the certificate were already on the books, but some have been especially designed for it. Students in the management track, for example, can take a course called "Literature, Money, and Markets," "orienting the reader as to how classics from Chaucer to Dickens are engaged in the business of thinking about business."

### **Modernizing the Major**



Clay Lomneth for The Chronicle

Melinda Zook is a history professor and the director of the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program at Purdue U. One goal of Cornerstone has been to persuade more STEM-focused students to take classes in the humanities and social sciences.

Florida State University's English department used to have just two majors: creative writing as well as literature, media, and culture.

In 2009 it added a third: editing, writing, and media. At the time, the reason was fairly practical. The English department had recently developed a graduate concentration in the history of text technologies, said Taylor, the department chair, and wanted to deploy that faculty expertise more broadly. It also wanted to create a major that pulled together the department's strengths in rhetoric, creative writing, and literature.

Editing, writing, and media has proved so popular that professors are struggling to keep up with demand. The number of majors, 662, is more than the other two majors combined.

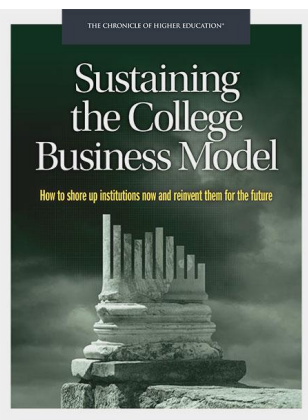
"The problems we have had," said Taylor, "while I've heard tragic stories of English departments falling apart, have been the problems of unanticipated success."

Taylor attributes the major's popularity, in part, to the fact that it gives students valuable skills while putting their experiences in context. So, for example, all students are required to take courses in writing and editing, for both print and online, as well as courses that teach them about the history of texts and the technologies that produced them. All texts are dependent on technologies, Taylor said, whether you're talking about cave paintings, Shakespearean dramas, or internet memes.

The major also includes an internship, allowing students to envision their professional futures. Some have worked at book publishers. Others have interned at literary magazines, media-strategy firms, or museums.

"We have added offerings that connect literature and culture to the 21st-century creative economy," said Taylor. "And that has proven to be amazingly attractive to undergraduates who are still interested in the things that have always attracted people to

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English departments.”

### **Rethinking Gateway Courses**

Turning around the decline in humanities majors has been a tough nut to crack for most institutions. Drawing more students into history or English or philosophy classes seems more doable. A number of universities are revamping introductory and intermediate-level courses as a way to lure more students.

At Virginia Tech, the history department watched the number of credit hours taken in the department drop from 14,000 to 8,700 in the span of five years, bottoming out in 2016. But since then it has seen its enrollments steadily climb — surpassing 14,000 credit hours last fall.

Gumbert, an associate professor of history and former associate chair, said her department’s faculty members began experimenting with course redesign following a restructuring of the major and the introduction of a new general-education program. “I tried to develop a comprehensive plan,” she said. “But it was sort of let’s try this and let’s try that.”

They began by rebalancing their offerings. The department was top-heavy, said Gumbert, offering lots of upperclass courses but not enough lower-level ones. So a number of higher-level courses were redesigned as introductory or intermediate ones, proving popular with students from across the campus. An upper-level history-of-technology course, for example, hardly drew any students three years ago. The introductory version is now consistently full. The same is true of a sequence of courses in African American history.

Gumbert also encouraged her colleagues to create courses designed with broad appeal. She developed one herself on the Cold War. Others created courses on classics in the modern world, and on war and medicine. A couple of faculty members are now at work designing large survey courses, including one on America in the 1960s and another on the history of night.

Gumbert made sure that all courses are presented with a clear and compelling description. A course on murder in American history, for example, is described as a study of how society’s definitions and views of killing have changed over the centuries, covering such topics as abortion, lynching, and vigilante justice. Gumbert also showed up at a majors fair to talk to students about spring classes. And she met with advisers in other disciplines to tell them about electives their students might like.

Those gateway courses stimulate students’ interest in the discipline, Gumbert said. “My philosophy is that if we can get people into our classes, they will stay, if not for a major or a minor, then for at least a few more classes.”

### **Connecting to General Education**

When the University of Kentucky restructured its general-education program a few years ago, the English department was hit hard. The revamp took a number of writing courses away from English and put them in a new department. And only a couple of the remaining

courses met the new gen-ed requirements. As a result, enrollments in the department plummeted.

The English department was able to engineer a turnaround through a strategy of developing new courses tied to general education. A new literature and citizenship course, for example, met a U.S. civics requirement. A new creative-writing course met one on creativity.

Peter Kalliney, then associate chair of the department, got professors to buy into the revamp by encouraging them to create courses on topics that interested them. And he asked everyone in the department to teach a general-education course, ensuring that students would be exposed to the more experienced professors in the department. Courses in topics such as mythology, the Bible, science fiction, and creative writing have proved popular with students.

Jonathan Allison, the current department chair, said that this year the department is also contributing to a new series of courses offered across the campus, called the freshman discovery seminar, which is a small class paired with a large lecture course. The English department offers, for example, a seminar on literature and vampires, which is paired with a large lecture on European folklore. While enrollments in mid- and upper-level courses are still suffering because of declines in the major, Allison said, course enrollments in the department remain strong.

### **The Kitchen-Sink Approach**

Some colleges are trying a host of things to bring more students into their departments, such as revamping introductory courses, creating new minors for students who don't want to commit to a full major, and tying the humanities more explicitly to certain careers.

This fall Harvard University's history department unveiled 16 new or revised gateway, or foundations, courses designed to draw more students, particularly freshmen, into the department. The courses have names like "The New Science of the Human Past" and "The Making of the Modern Middle East." They are centered on big questions, such as "What happened in the 20th century to make the U.S. the most powerful — and feared — country in the world?"

They also promise accessibility: No prerequisites are needed, and no historical-analysis skills are assumed. They will teach all that, including how to use primary-source material and make a historical argument.

Even at Harvard, where the diploma itself would seem to guarantee a relatively smooth transition into the working world, professors can feel students' anxiety. It's not that students don't want to ask the big and enduring questions about human existence, professors say. It's that they're afraid that if they put all of their eggs in one basket, they won't be able to land a job.

To that end, the department has created a series of clusters, or groups of courses, to appeal to students who want to study history but also want to see a clear path to a career. The clusters cover law, business, journalism, government, activism, and the environment. A student interested in environmental issues can take a series of courses relevant to that career, such as one on the history of energy, while a business major could study, among other things, the history of women in economic life.

“The Career Cluster idea is about trying to get those students who are insecure about concentrating in history to understand that if they make that choice, we are going to provide a skill set beyond college,” said Lisa McGirr, director of undergraduate studies. “They might have a love for history, but they’re sort of worried about how their responses will be. They’ve said explicitly, ‘Wow, this is so great because one of my concerns is my parents saying, What are you going to do with that degree?’”

*Beth McMurtrie writes about technology's influence on teaching and the future of learning.*

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