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'Human sciences' as relevant now as in the past



Dean of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Georges Van Den Abbeele. Photo by Mary Knox Merrill

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The "death of the humanities" on college campuses has been widely reported in the media, particularly as the recession has pressured students to pursue professional courses of study. But to paraphrase Mark Twain, it's a death that has been greatly exaggerated, says the dean of **Northeastern's College of Social Sciences and Humanities**, Georges Van Den Abbeele. In fact, he explains here, the humanities have never been more relevant to students and to society.

What is your take on the media reports about "the death of the humanities?"

I don't think it's a question of keeping the humanities alive. They have never been more alive, even as they remain critically underfunded and under-resourced. The humanities and the social sciences, by their very name, are about human beings, literally

everything that people do, or think or imagine. From this point of view, the "human sciences" are the hub of the entire creative intellectual process, in the University and beyond.

And while there tends not to be a direct correlation between our fields of study and potential careers, in truth, we prepare our students to pursue almost any career, including ones that our graduates will invent, as has often been the case.

Then what accounts for the idea that seems to be really prevalent now, that humanities studies in particular have become irrelevant?

The humanities and social sciences are too often viewed as abstract fields of learning, disembodied and disconnected from everything else.

Those of us in the field need to counteract this. Something I've insisted upon throughout my career, and continue to do here, are the living connections between the kinds of knowledge humanist scholars pursue and the kinds of knowledge that is needed and pursued in a variety of occupations.

What are those connections, especially here at Northeastern?

Take academic research, for example. Currently there are three big research themes at the University: health, sustainability, and security. How do the humanities and social sciences fit into these? At first glance, it appears we don't fit in at all.

In fact, if you look at health, it isn't enough just to develop new drugs or treatments: health policy and economics are crucial for their implementation; and in understanding how people relate to health care systems, cultural issues can be crucial. In one of my previous institutions, we developed an entire curriculum in medical Spanish, because the area had a significant population speaking only Spanish, with different cultural relations to illness and wellness that posed particular challenges for medical practitioners unfamiliar with the language and culture.

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Sustainability is similar. In addition to the challenge of inventing green technologies, we have environmental policy issues, and issues of environmental ethics, which is a branch of philosophy.

Sustainability, too, is about the maintenance of our cultures, our past, and our identities, understanding who we are and where we came from, as well as the very different backgrounds of other cultures, peoples, and places.

And security is not just about defusing bombs, but about understanding the psychology and the cultures of aggrieved groups. Languages are, in themselves, whole ways of understanding profoundly how one thinks inside.

An example I often give is the invasion of Iraq. The Army's corps of interpreters had been trained in Morocco. Now, Arabic is the same written language, but as a spoken language, it's very different from region to region. In Baghdad, 3,000 miles away, those folks couldn't understand Moroccan Arabic if they tried. So our forces couldn't function effectively, because we didn't have the right linguistic and cultural skills.

How have you seen Northeastern students respond to the humanities and social sciences in your relatively short time here?

One of the things you read about is the elimination or curtailment of language programs. And yet, the generation of students coming in today is filling up language classes. They're doing it because, post-9/11, they fully understand the world as a global environment and the need to understand other languages. And they're learning really different combinations: Arabic and Cantonese, Spanish and Hindi, Russian and Portuguese.

This is especially true here, because our students are going on global co-ops, they're going on Dialogue of Civilizations trips, and they really want to understand the cultures they visit. And their interest did not just begin here. Some 32 percent of the students who entered Northeastern this fall had five or more years of high school language. So rather than cutting in this area, we need to find ways to build.

Northeastern has its own unique educational approach: experiential learning and co-op. How does this make the humanities special here?

First, I don't accept the idea that experiential learning is in contradiction with the liberal arts. In fact, they go very closely together.

Co-op and experiential learning are about taking the lessons one learns in the classroom and testing them in another environment. I think this makes the humanities and social sciences more attractive. The opportunity to take Middle Eastern studies, for example, and then work with an NGO in Cairo or Beirut or Tel Aviv, or to pursue a major in history and work on cultural preservation in Peru is to gain an incredibly rich education while engaging in work of the highest importance.

To me this means that co-op is not just a signature program for Northeastern, it's the cornerstone of what liberal arts education should be going forward.

It also undercuts the idea that students majoring in the humanities don't really have career opportunities, because, in fact, co-op can show them what's possible.

When I visit alumni, they are in any number of fields. They're in business, they're in law, they're in the sciences, they're in technology, they're in all kinds of careers you couldn't have predicted from their undergraduate major.

It also makes a big difference that the humanities are irreducibly interdisciplinary. I'm struck not only by the number of our students learning widely different languages, but also by the number of combined majors, and major-minor combinations, whether it's biology and English or philosophy and engineering, or what have you. It's an indicator of where we are, and where the strength of this University lies, because the students who come with that kind of creativity in their majors are going to be equally creative in their careers.

Are the same forces driving graduate studies as well?

Graduate education in the humanities has traditionally focused exclusively on preparing future professors. And while that preparation will always be a necessary part of what the Ph.D. is — it is the credential that allows you to become a University professor — in the sciences, and even in the arts, that isn't always the preferred outcome.

I've tracked a lot of humanities Ph.D.s, and they often go into other fields—publishing, historic preservation, government relations—so it's not true, statistically speaking, that humanities Ph.D.s have fewer job options than others, unless you limit that to purely academic employment.

I think it's a lesson we need to take to heart: stop thinking of the Ph.D.s who do something other than teach in a University as failures. We need to see them as the positive, creative successes they are, and value that.
