

The Humanities Need to Do More to Reach Non-Majors

What we can learn from the ‘service departments.’

By [Dan Edelstein](#) | September 25, 2026



For many years, humanities departments at my institution have offered [gateway courses](#) intended to attract students who are humanities-curious but not ready for a major commitment. Rolled out in response to dwindling numbers of actual majors, these courses have generally done quite well. But they have not met the broader goal of directing more students into upper-level humanities classes. Students linger at the gate, but they do not pass through.

This problem illustrates a bigger issue with how we organize and teach the humanities to undergraduate students. The unit of measure remains the department: We nervously track the downward trend of English and history majors and try desperate measures to stop the bleeding. But is this the right way to think about the role of the humanities in a college education?

Consider, for instance, mathematics. Math majors only make up around 1.3 percent of [all bachelor's degrees granted in the United States](#), which is in fact lower than the number of English majors (1.6 percent). If we don't hear about a math crisis, it's because huge numbers of students take math courses without majoring in the field.

Math, physics, and chemistry are sometimes referred to as “service departments,” because they offer required courses for students in other majors. In this regard, the comparison with the humanities is limited: Engineering departments are unlikely to require courses in philosophy, literature, or history (though some [argue](#) that they should). But that does not mean we can't learn from their approach. What might it mean for humanities departments to adopt a service-oriented curriculum? Instead of fighting over the handful of students who still choose to major in the humanities, what if we offered courses for all students, regardless of their majors?

Humanities professors might counter that they already do. Any engineering student can take a course on the late Victorian novel or the Meiji restoration. It's not our fault if they don't enroll in our classes! The problem, however, is that humanities departments organize their curricula around disciplinary divisions that are mostly unintelligible to undergraduates. Many of the students I talk to at my STEM-focused institution aren't sure whether they are more interested in literature, philosophy, or history, let alone any specific subfield. They have no clue where to start. We have carved up humanistic learning according to research specializations of which our students are wholly ignorant. What was once known as the *enkyklios paideia*, or “circle of learning” (from which we get the word “encyclopedia”), has been blown apart, its pieces scattered across a few dozen academic units. In our own minds, the outline of the whole can still be glimpsed from these *membra disjecta*. But from the point of view of our students, we have transformed the humanities into a labyrinth of unknown twists and turns, without any thread to guide them.

Reviving the humanities at American colleges is unlikely to be achieved at the departmental level alone. In hindsight, this is unsurprising. The department, as an academic unit, was introduced in American colleges to administer *graduate*, not undergraduate, studies. Its [first appearance](#) was at Yale in 1847 to award the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. When colleges began to require that students [concentrate](#) or major in a particular subject around the turn of the 20th century, these newfangled departments gained a secondary purpose. They gradually took over curricular and pedagogical tasks that had traditionally been the purview of the College — a vestigial body still found at some institutions.

The problem with this administrative rearrangement is that, in the humanities at least, departments focused only on what they believed students ought to study in their own field of knowledge. This pattern continues to our day. To major, say, in chemistry, a student must also take courses in math, physics, and biology. The student who chooses to major in French literature, by contrast, is not made to take courses in history, philosophy, religious studies, sociology, classics, political theory, or art history, as if literature were not intricately connected to

topics in these fields. At institutions with graduate programs, there is a further tendency to regard the undergraduate degree as a preliminary step toward the Ph.D. — despite the fact that only a fraction of humanities majors ends up pursuing graduate studies in their area of concentration.

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Humanities faculty members with friends in math, physics, or chemistry departments might voice a note of caution. There is a certain degree of drudgery that comes from working in a service department, and from forcing hundreds of students every quarter to struggle through calculus or organic chemistry. Is this really a solution for the shrinking ice cap of humanities enrollments? Thankfully, offering humanities courses to all undergraduate students need not have an “eat your broccoli” quality to them. A great example of how this can be achieved comes from Purdue University, where enrollment in the humanities [jumped](#) when professors began to offer courses on “[Transformative Texts](#).” These courses focus on classic works in the humanities while also teaching composition and rhetoric skills. Students who take five such courses receive a certificate through the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program. It is fast becoming a model for colleges nationwide, and the Teagle Foundation has been [supporting](#) programs in the Cornerstone spirit.

Unlike large math or physics courses, humanities courses are often best delivered as discussion seminars, which place a natural cap on their size. For students who spend most of the week in large auditoriums listening to a professor lecture, this structural contrast is in and of itself a net positive. It also shows that “service” in the humanities need not mean coaxing hundreds of apathetic students into attending your lectures on Dante or the U.S. Constitution. It does mean that, if done well, there will in fact be a need to hire *more* faculty to lead small-group seminar discussions. Changing the way we teach is probably the only way to reverse the trend of job losses for humanities Ph.D.s.

The key question is, What will it mean to do this well? Why would engineering or pre-med students *want* to take a humanities seminar? Again, talking with students highlights that the interest is there but is often not matched by the offerings at hand. We have to untrain ourselves from thinking only in hyperspecialized ways about humanities courses. We must become willing to teach topics or books on which we are not experts. In fact, faculty who take the plunge often find that they are *better* at teaching undergraduates material that they don’t specialize in, since they’re not fighting guerrilla battles in the footnotes. Instead, they’re focusing on the very aspects that strike students as most interesting and exciting. In this style of teaching, the faculty member isn’t there to be a walking Wikipedia full of facts, but to model how to discuss a text or topic as a thoughtful, educated person.

In the end, there are many ways to make the humanities more accessible and enticing to undergraduates, if we’re willing to experiment. There are of course incentive structures to be

worked out, distribution requirements to be distributed, deans to be dealt with, and metrics to be redefined. Teaching the humanities to all students does not mean that we should cease to offer advanced courses to the happy few who do decide to dive deeper, but it does entail a reallocation of teaching resources. It might also have the immeasurable benefit of ensuring that generations of students go through college and come out with a richer inner life.