

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges

**Humanities Instruction in the
California Community Colleges:
Renewing Our Commitment**

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Humanities Instruction in the California Community Colleges: Renewing Our Commitment

The decline of the humanities in American education is lamented in many recent books and articles, which suggest that many of today's college graduates lack what E. D. Hirsch, Jr. calls "cultural literacy--that common body of knowledge educated people were once assumed to possess. Recent developments make this an ideal time for the faculty of the California Community Colleges to address this issue. The new Title 5 changes reinforce faculty responsibility for curriculum and require each college to review all courses in the curriculum. This provides an opportunity to look at the quality and rigor of courses in the humanities and to reexamine how they fit into degree requirements and general education patterns. The review of the master plan and the pending California Community College reform legislation (AB 1725) should encourage the reassessment of each college's mission and force each institution to look at what constitutes a good education and what an educated person should know.

Two recent studies, William J. Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* and the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges' *Humanities Policy Statement: The Study of the Humanities in Community, Technical, and Junior Colleges*, are excellent sources of information about the current state of the humanities. This paper will attempt to relate information from these studies to the teaching of the humanities in the California Community Colleges and to make some recommendations for the improvement of our efforts in humanities education.

Since most students take humanities courses during the first two years of college, the community colleges have a particular responsibility in examining and strengthening the role of the humanities in the curriculum. Guidance is needed for our large number of undecided students "shopping" for courses to take, and a coherent humanities component is needed for our many liberal arts majors.

What are the Humanities?

The word "humanities" automatically brings to mind certain disciplines: languages and linguistics; literature; history, jurisprudence, anthropology, and other aspects of social science; philosophy; archeology; comparative religion; ethics; and the history, criticism, and theory of the arts. However, to define the humanities as a mere list of disciplines is much too narrow. The humanities examine what is human or, as stated in the Bennett study, the best that has been said, thought, written, or otherwise expressed about the human experience." They also represent a particular learning approach distinguished by beliefs about what is worthy of study. The humanities include methods of particular disciplines as well as methods of broad, interdisciplinary study and, according to the Bennett report, pose the following questions:

"What is justice?"

"What should be loved?"

"What deserves to be defended?"

"What is courage?"

“What is noble?”

“What is base?”

“Why do civilizations flourish?”

“Why do they decline?”

Decline in Humanities Education in American Colleges and Universities

Too many students in the United States today are receiving -baccalaureate degrees without even the most rudimentary knowledge of history, literature, art, philosophy, and languages. Recent history provides us with several reasons for this. In the late 1960's and the 1970's the demand of students for a greater role in determining the agenda for their own education led to a gradual abandonment of courses required for all students and a trend toward a practical (career-oriented) education. At the same time, educators failed to exercise curricular authority. Course requirements were determined by departmental competition, and the popularity of courses was a primary consideration. The prevailing attitude was that all learning is relative and subject to trends. This attitude created a “Cafeteria” curriculum from which students chose freely.

- A 1984-85 survey by the American Council on Education reveals the following shocking statistics:
- A student can obtain a bachelors degree from 75% of American colleges and universities without having studied European history.
- 72% of American colleges and universities allow a student to graduate with no study of American literature or history.
- A bachelor's degree can be obtained from 86% of American colleges and universities without the study of the classical Greek and Roman civilizations.
- Foreign language was required for graduation in only 47% of American colleges and universities in 1983, as compared with 89% in 1966.

The following statistic from the same study is particularly significant for community colleges:

- 87% of all credit hours in the humanities are taken in the freshman and sophomore years.

Value of the Humanities in Community College Education

There are many more tangible reasons why students should study the humanities than the simple fact that such study is Good for them. or will make them More well-rounded individuals.” In today's constantly changing society there is a need not only for practical (career-oriented) education, but also for an education which helps develop insights and abilities necessary for fulfilling both public and private lives. The humanities concentrate on the skills of the mind and of language which develop clear reason and communication and promote an appreciation of the

impact of technology on the human environment. They encourage the best mental habits and nurture imagination and creativity, while promoting the ability to make value judgments. The humanities teach a disciplined approach to questions of self and society that causes the student to reflect upon the way personal origins and beliefs affect values and actions.

Study of the humanities enriches the community as a whole as well as the individual student. A balance between the individual and society is fostered, and social cohesion develops through shared understanding, language, and values. Public and private practical aspects of life are made more valuable through the ability to think clearly about important social and personal questions and to communicate through clear written expression. Study of the humanities provides the student with these capabilities.

Recommendations for Community Colleges:

Make sure that there is a significant humanities component in the AA degree and general education transfer requirements.

The new changes in Title 5 require that all courses in the curriculum be reviewed to insure appropriate rigor. As curriculum committees undertake the challenge, they should also examine degree and transfer requirements and through this process determine whether all students, regardless of major, are receiving adequate exposure to the humanities. (The General Education Transfer Curriculum, proposed by the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates, requires three semesters of Arts and Humanities.)

Develop an institutional general education philosophy of what a student should know to be truly educated and a plan for helping students gain knowledge of the humanities through a coherent program of courses in sequence with appropriate program of courses in sequence with appropriate prerequisites and corequisites.

The Curriculum Committee (or an *ad hoc* subcommittee) might serve as the steering committee to guide the process for developing a general education philosophy. There should be wide involvement of faculty and instructional administrators in this process. If a clear general education philosophy exists, narrow departmentalism will be avoided when curriculum committees choose courses from the humanities to be included in general education requirements.

Clearly identify which courses are appropriate for students who will take only a few courses in the humanities.

Many high-unit majors will allow students limited exposure to courses outside the major field, so it is extremely important to guide these students toward humanities courses of a general nature. Care must be taken to promote a balance between breadth and depth. Interdisciplinary general education courses serve this purpose well as long as substance and rigor, rather than trendiness, are stressed.

Be sure that instruction in the humanities includes reading writing, speaking, and critical analysis components well integrate into the subject matter being taught.

The evaluation process can be used to examine the state of instruction in the humanities. Professional development resources should be employed to develop teaching skills and further knowledge of these disciplines, and increased support of humanities instruction through libraries and learning resource centers should be encouraged.

Work to improve articulation with high schools and universities in humanities instruction.

The Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr. report on the first national assessment of history and literature, "*What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*" reveals that the decline of humanities in higher education is reflected in high schools. Through enhanced articulation by such means as the Humanities Competency Expectation Statement of the Intersegmental Senates, high schools, community colleges, and universities must work together to plan a unified and coherent humanities curriculum for their students.