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STUDYING HUMANITIES TEACHES YOU HOW TO GET A JOB

Forget the tut-tutting of politicians: The skills you learn in the humanities are exactly the skills you use in a job search.

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"If you're studying interpretive dance, God bless you, but there's not a lot of jobs right now in America looking for people with that as a skill set," Kentucky governor Matt Bevin declared in September, at a conference about higher education. Bevin's skepticism about the humanities and arts isn't an anomaly; politicians regularly joke about the supposed uselessness of non-STEM training. In 2014, President Barack Obama told students to major in trades rather than art history. In 2011, Governor Rick Scott of Florida said that it wasn't of "vital interest" to his state to have students major in anthropology. And so on. Math, engineering, science, trades: Those are practical, politicians agree. Literature, art, and anthropology? Those don't help you get jobs.

In fact, the reverse is true: The skills you learn in the humanities are exactly the skills you use in a job search. The humanities teach students to understand the different rules and expectations that govern different genres, to examine social cues and rituals, to think about the audience for and reception of different kinds of communications. In short, they teach students how to apply for the kinds of jobs students will be looking for after college.

This is not the usual argument in defense of the humanities. Usually, those rebutting STEM-obsessed politicians point to the spiritual role of the arts, or evoke the general benefits of critical thinking.

"The humanities conserve and safeguard those aspects of our being that intersect with the meanings of human existence beyond industry," Sarah Churchwell, chair of public humanities at the University of London, writes. Churchwell isn't wrong: The humanities do have value that isn't easily reflected in dollars and cents on the market. So do non-humanities fields, for that matter. Math and science and nursing and engineering can all create a sense of curiosity, wonder, and civic engagement. But these fields also have potential career benefits—and the humanities have as well.

EVEN POLITICIANS CRAFTING ANTI-HUMANITIES PROPAGANDA ARE USING TECHNIQUES ASSOCIATED WITH THE HUMANITIES.

In particular, the humanities teach the skills needed for applying for jobs. These skills are specific to the task of getting hired, and can be distinct from the skills you need to actually perform a job successfully. Someone following Obama's advice and majoring in a trade, for example, may still need to produce a cover letter. Even if you're looking for a job in STEM, you need to be able to write persuasively.

Most people grudgingly admit that writing is a necessary skill, however tainted by the humanities it might be. But applying for a job doesn't just involve composing a single essay. Today, to apply for a job, you need to create a range of writings in different genres. You need to have a business card, a LinkedIn profile, a resume, and a cover letter, and often you need to fill out a separate application as well. Each of these documents is supposed to support and refer to the others, to create an overarching narrative about who you are and why you deserve the job. That narrative, in turn, is supposed to inform, and be buttressed by, one or more interviews. Text and performance have to fit together.

Study in history, literature, anthropology, and other fields in the humanities is designed to teach students to master just such tasks. Students in humanities classes are asked to examine and synthesize multiple sources to create written or oral presentations. They are also asked to think about the different requirements of different genres. Identifying the characteristics of a successful sonnet isn't that different from identifying the characteristics of a successful resume. Resumes involve creating a story about who you are—and part of the point of the humanities is teaching that this requires both attention to detail and creativity.

In creating a cover letter or a resume, you want to make yourself look like everyone else, and you also want to make yourself stand out. The study of literature (as one example) is designed to teach students to recognize broad categories of works, and successful individual variation. It helps students understand how to approach a writing task with one eye on generic conventions, and one on creating an individual, particular impression. The job process requires students to take a great deal of information and squish it into a small, ill-fitting container. That's also a fair description of writing a research paper. Doing the second is good practice for the first.

Studying humanities also teaches students about anticipating and understanding audiences. When you apply for a job, you read a job description, search online, and try to put together a picture of what the people at the company are like, and what they want from you. These skills are precisely what disciplines like anthropology and history teach. Students in these fields gather information from books, interviews, and observation to put together a picture of a different culture. In the arts, students create works in an effort to impress, or move, an imagined audience. In the job search, you are looking at yourself from the outside, and trying to think about how some other particular group, with particular needs and interests, will judge your work. You are essentially turning yourself into a work of written-and-performance art to be evaluated.

Studying humanities allows you to see yourself through others' eyes by teaching you about other cultures and other ways of viewing the world. By understanding others and entering into their worlds, we become better and broader people. This is valuable in itself. But it is also an important skill because understanding how someone else thinks is essential if you are trying to get them to like you, or give you a job.

Even politicians crafting anti-humanities propaganda are using techniques associated with the

humanities as part of their job application process. When Bevin sneers at dance majors, he's betting that the electorate doesn't tend to like dance majors. He's turning a complex issue into an aesthetically striking slogan in order to sway his employers (i.e. voters), whom he hopes to convince to renew his contract. He's engaged in a kind of dance of his own. And that dance, despite Bevin's protests to the contrary, is familiar to humanities majors and job seekers alike.