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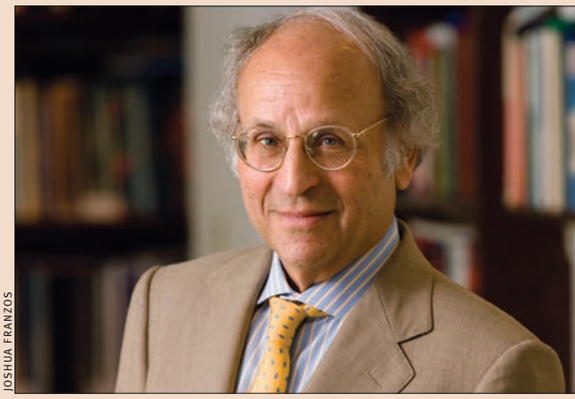
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JOSHUA FRANZOS

Until I began to learn to draw, I was never much interested in looking at art.
—Richard Feynman

Support for the liberal arts is dwindling at many U.S. universities in favor of technology-related skills training courses.

There was a time when there was no distinction between the humanities and the sciences. They were seamless. Think of Aristotle, Da Vinci, Descartes. Indeed, the humanities and sciences inform each other in important, although often ineffable, ways. Where they intersect is often a crucial nexus.

Ada Lovelace, poet Lord Byron's daughter, is often described as the first computer programmer. She was encouraged by her mother to study math to tame her restless spirit—the thinking was that algebra might serve as a prophylactic to ward against the mental afflictions that tortured her celebrity father. Lovelace came to view mathematics as a beautiful, poetic language, which empowered her to explore "unseen relations between things," as she put it. I imagine many mathematicians feel the same way.

The composer Alexander Borodin, the poet William Carlos Williams, and the authors W. Somerset Maugham and Anton Chekhov were all physicians. It's not surprising that a doctor would examine what it means to be human on more than one plane. As the existentialists asked, how do we find meaning when life's impermanence presents itself so vividly to us daily? We must be taught to think with complexity if we are to answer such complex questions.

For most of Western history, the poor, people of color, and women were discouraged or excluded from pursuing a liberal education. Even within the aristocracy, the contributions of women were suppressed. Lady Lovelace had the potential for eminence in math, yet delving deeper into her studies was likely to injure her, her mentor Augustus DeMorgan believed. The intensity would have required "all the strength of a man's constitution to bear," he wrote. Such "tension of mind" was for the men who would run things; the rest of the crowd was welcome to build specific skill sets to keep the machine going—though their voices would be "all but absent from history," as Emily Dickinson put it.

The critic Francine Prose has considered whether the humanities are under attack now precisely because they enable students to think in more complex ways than the simplifications of our current political and corporate discourse.

Middle and low income families are being priced out of higher education altogether. Our current situation, of flat wages and rising education costs, must be addressed. But let's not sell each other short. Imagine if our civic leaders were to adopt the scientific method—a template for civil, disciplined, evidence-based, and sound discourse—to probe this problem.

Are we about to pedal backward so that a mere sliver of the population is privy to the pleasures and rigors of literature, language, philosophy, art, music, and history? Or of mathematics, physics, and biology? These pursuits allow us to create, imagine, and engineer great works. They help us to perceive and understand nature and its abstractions. And they help us understand each other. We can't afford to be frugal of spirit. I'd make a similar argument regarding access to health care. A civilized society has its foundation in the liberal arts *and* sciences, and also in the wellness of all of its people. These are investments that enrich us and make the world a better place.

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