



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## THE TOP TEN REASONS TO STUDY THE HUMANITIES

At least once a semester, usually from a nontraditional student, comes the question, “I’m an accounting major. Why do I have to take humanities?” It also has come from chemistry majors, engineering majors, elementary school teachers, policemen, firemen, pre-med students...well, you get the picture. Usually, I fire off some glib answer about how the humanities enrich your life, and I can hear the unspoken “Yeah, right!” rattle around the classroom.

After more than 30 years of teaching, I didn’t set out to answer this question seriously and systematically until last year. As I addressed the question, it became apparent that I needed to clarify for myself—and, more importantly, for my students—why humanities should be studied. I devised the following list of academic, professional, social, and personal reasons for studying the humanities and added a short explanation of how humanities courses accomplish these goals.

### To practice critical thinking

By asking students to analyze and synthesize college-level texts—including primary sources—and to deal with the complexities of discipline, perspective, and historical period, humanities courses foster the development of mental flexibility and confidence in the ability to think and understand. Development of higher order critical thinking skills—especially analysis and synthesis—are traits that mark successful students, as well as successful professionals.

### To improve communication

Humanities courses develop abilities in reading, thinking, writing, and speaking. Through class discussions, reading assignments, and written analyses, students gain mastery of a set of skills that professors look for in their students and employers look for in their employees.

### To view knowledge as a whole

While academic studies are often compartmentalized with each discipline occupying a distinct place, humanities courses cut across discipline boundaries to integrate information, ideas, and opinions from a variety of perspectives. Today, the ability to integrate knowledge is a necessary function of cutting-edge developments, whether they are in nuclear medicine, information technology, or the humanities.

### To develop a global perspective

Humanities courses address the important achievements of world civilizations. By providing knowledge of world cultures, humanities courses give students a global perspective on a world that is unified both technologically and economically.

### To appreciate diversity

Knowledge of world civilizations—an important part of the humanities curriculum—increases tolerance for cultural differences, lessens tensions fueled by ignorance and prejudice, and helps students build a healthy respect for cultural and individual differences.

### To strengthen community resources

In humanities courses, students experience the connection between culture and community. They participate in museum visits, concerts, and theater performances. Supporting the efforts of local artists improves the quality of life in the community and boosts the local economy as well.

### To clarify values

Humanities courses address multiple viewpoints on right and wrong by analyzing ambiguous moral situations. In the process, students confront what they think and believe. In no other area of general education—and in few other courses—are students asked to examine the process of valuing and to understand the nature of moral decision making in such a meaningful way.



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### To deepen sources of wisdom

By learning about how famous figures have dealt with circumstances—for example, the death of a loved one (*Antigone*), the birth of a child (Raphael's *Madonna and Child with Goldfinch*), the challenges of old age (*King Lear*), or the nature of choices (Existentialism)—students become better equipped to deal with difficult and trying times. By seeing more possibilities, from more points of view, students have increased resources from which to draw wisdom and perseverance.

### To know what is enduring

While fashions come and go, the idea of fashion and individual expression remains a constant. The nature of reality (Plato), the beauty of the human form (Michelangelo), and the price of loneliness (Emily Dickinson) are ideas which continue to dominate our thoughts. By illustrating what lasts and what humans have found meaningful throughout time, humanities courses impart a basis on which to separate passing fads from enduring legacies and to differentiate the meaningful from the meaningless.

### To be inspired

Humanities courses awaken the spirit. Interesting ideas on love, family, and morality, as well as well-known authors, have provided inspiration for generations of human beings. Because humanities courses deal with important ideas—ancient and modern—many students find their spirits awakened and their love of learning fueled by their encounters with the great minds of yesterday and today.

These are compelling reasons for studying the humanities, as well as a compelling rationale for the inclusion of humanities courses in the general education curriculum. These reasons situate the humanities squarely in the center of a well-rounded, well-considered educational program. If we help students situate their humanities courses within their larger programs of study as we help them find multiple answers to the question, “Why do I have to take humanities?” we strengthen support for the humanities. We help future voters and policy-makers understand the crucial roles that humanities courses play, not only in undergraduate education, but also in sustaining healthy communities and in creating lives that are personally satisfying.

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