

# Humanities Enrollment Is in Free Fall



By Alex Berezow, PhD — July 31, 2018



Credit: Storyblocks [1]

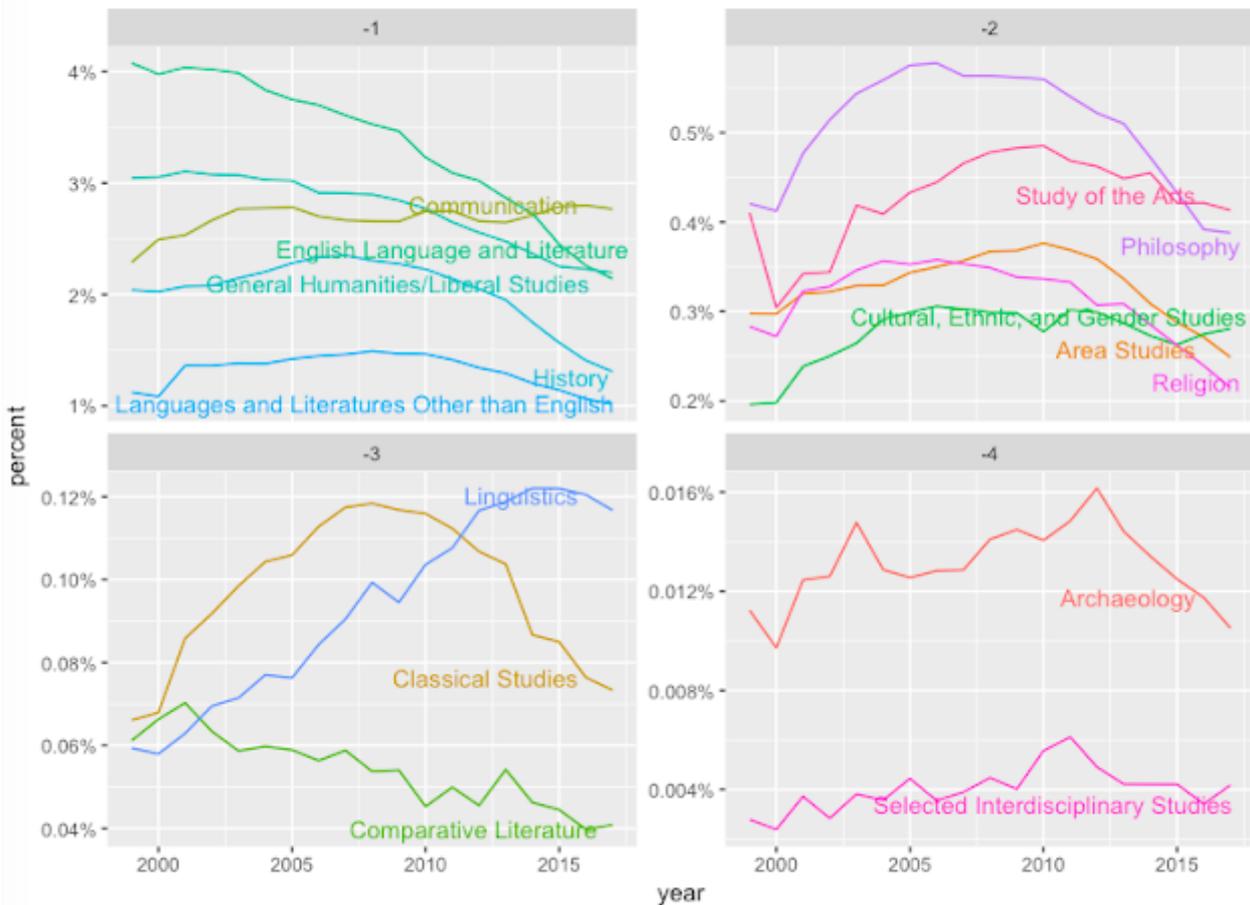
The humanities are in big trouble. That's the conclusion drawn by Benjamin Schmidt, an Assistant Professor of History at Northeastern University. He has the data to back it up.

In his [analysis](#) [2], Dr. Schmidt depicts several graphs, all of which show a fairly striking trend: Students are rejecting the humanities. The most striking graph, which includes data for English, Languages, History, and Philosophy, shows that the number of college degrees in these fields awarded as a percentage of all college degrees fell from roughly 7.5% in the 2000s to under 5% today.

While some humanities fields -- such as cultural, gender and ethnic studies -- have escaped the devastation, most others have not. Indeed, Dr. Schmidt reveals that enrollment is down in nearly every field considered part of the humanities.

## 20-year trajectories of all humanities fields, share of degrees

Categories from American Academy of Arts and Sciences Humanities Indicators  
Grouped by size. 85% of all degrees on this chart are in the top left corner.



Ben Schmidt with IPEDS data and American Academy of Arts and Sciences Taxonomy  
I don't think Communications is a humanities field, but the Academy does, so I'm including it.

[2]

Dr. Schmidt also writes, "The social science fields that most closely resemble humanistic ones -- sociology, anthropology, international relations, and political science -- have also seen serious drops." What's going on?

The professor notes that the decline began around 2008 or shortly thereafter, which coincided with the financial crisis. Though he doesn't explicitly state this, it is hard to believe that is merely coincidental. College is expensive, and students may be driven toward fields that they believe are worth the money. As it so happens, Dr. Schmidt says that some of the biggest increases in enrollment occurred in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), as well as health professions like nursing.

His analysis, however, misses the mark in one major way: Dr. Schmidt rejects the notion that the quality of the subject matter has driven students away. He writes, "Stop complaining about 'postmodernism,' or African-American studies." I quite strongly disagree.

### Why Are the Humanities Collapsing?

There is probably not much data available on why students choose the majors they do. So, we are largely left to speculate. However, it is difficult to avoid discussing some broad cultural changes in both academia and society as a whole.

**1. There is a widespread belief that humanities degrees should be avoided.** Linking a master's degree in art history to working as a barista at Starbucks has become a punchline. Even President Obama [mocked art history](#) [3]. The criticisms are exaggerated, but there's enough truth to them to scare prospective students away. A [study](#) [4] by the National Center for Education Statistics shows that humanities majors earn less money than other students and are more likely to be unemployed.

**2. The humanities generate too much nonsensical research.** Postmodernist beliefs absolutely have ruined the humanities. For the uninitiated, postmodernism is essentially a form of moral and epistemic relativism. Right and wrong are relative, and truth itself is relative. When a field can no longer distinguish truth from lies -- or worthwhile knowledge from dubious anecdotes -- then it is flirting with catastrophe. The problem is so bad that there is a satirical [postmodernist generator](#) [5] that randomly strings together essays. They are utterly nonsensical, but then so is some actual humanities research. How else can we explain that a PhD was awarded for [this](#) [6]?



# Becoming a Sailor: A (Critical) Analytic Autoethnographic Account of Navigating Tensions as a 'Woke' White Woman Working for Racial Justice



[Doyle, Jennifer Lynn](#). University of South Carolina, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018. 10790197.

**3. The humanities, and academia in general, are politically biased.** The political skew among the humanities is laughably absurd. A [paper](#) [7] in *Econ Journal Watch* showed that in history departments, Democrats outnumber Republicans more than 33 to 1. Overall, academia is getting worse. The Democratic:Republican ratio among the oldest professors (over age 65) is a "mere" 10 to 1, but among the youngest professors (under age 36), it is nearly 23 to 1.

Taken together, the collapse of the humanities should have been foreseen. If you're a parent, why would you encourage your child to be indoctrinated with a skewed worldview? If you're a student, why would you voluntarily sign up for a major that demonstrably has poorer job and earnings prospects but the same mountain of debt?

The tragedy in all this is that the humanities are important. But we're watching as an entire academic discipline digs its own grave, but doesn't know why it's digging it.

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[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/31/obama-becomes-latest-politician-criticize-liberal-arts-discipline>

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