

The Prior Award Essay Submission

Rachel Eubanks
Senior English and Psychology Major
25 February 2024

If René Descartes, a founder of the Humanities, argued “I think, therefore I am,”¹ I move that in the Humanities we care, therefore we are. Public liberal arts universities offer an approachable focus for a diverse student population on the often-overlooked Humanities. By not simply encouraging but teaching critical thinking and community engagement, the liberal arts education requires that we care about individuals with the empathy and passion that our humanity is marked by. From reviving ancient artifacts in the modern era, to comparing cultures melded or disparate, and to considering every gender and race, the Humanities listen to all the voices that make up the chorus of humanity itself. Humans are *students* above all else, striving each and every day to understand and appreciate the voices of those learning and living around us. That striving takes the form of searching for the answers to our purposes, flaws, senses of self, and everything that it means to be made human in that which humanity has made. In response, a liberal arts education conflates studentship with stewardship, in that what you learn is who you are, and such an approach is evident in the active learning strategies and interdisciplinary perspectives in the Humanities.

Searching for the answers to our humanity in a liberal arts education expresses a profound and determined love of people, as well as the creations wrought by our self-awareness. In my semesters as a student of literature and creative writing, I have found that the most effective poets and authors speak their own language, drawing on the rawest of human senses. Their syntax trickles into symbolism and diction matures into design until the page before me becomes the reader’s roadmap to the human experience. Then, by analyzing its details, I too am tasked with the riddle of what it means to be human. So I search for the answers in my lectures, in Norton anthologies, and in PowerPoint presentations, until I find the answer a dozen different times in a hundred separate ways, each one more enigmatic yet doubly encouraging than the last. That

encouragement to keep searching echoes in the common theme throughout all intangible or unquantifiable human works: the idea that creating art or literature is so important that it's worth devoting one's life to.

Public liberal arts universities offer the option to study, reflect, or contribute to the Humanities; at the very least, students will be able to intertwine evidence across conversations, classrooms, and disciplines, harmonizing with that chorus of humanity. In the liberal arts, the students' voice will be developed through critical education as their own, rather than two-dimensional rote memorization. This impact is reflected in how students become intimate with the idea of people and what it means to be alive through the work of distinct persons. We know Gertrude Stein's Lost Generation as such because Stein knew it as such. We realize the discord and trauma of the bombing of Guernica through Pablo Picasso's own *Guernica*. Through these individual testaments to a larger population, we find that the creations born out of our constructed societies and scaffolded identities are far more enduring than we could ever be. As students, we see what, after all our humanity has dried up, lives on. Thus, the answer to our significance is found from studying in the liberal arts and revealed through what endures.

In the pursuit of these answers, at the top of every period lies a question mark, beckoning its students toward the point where the boundary between the individual and humanity as a whole becomes imperceptible. Once the liberal arts faculty and curriculum have built up the tools of understanding, the goal of the university courses shifts from seeking answers to creating them. For humanity to continue, much less to progress, every student in this discipline must apply their knowledge to create, adding change to our legacy.

Descartes stated the importance of humanity's creations perfectly: "For it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to use it well."¹ Because of their longevity and relevance, the answers in the liberal arts offer a chance at building cultures, at shaping society, and at changing minds. Overall, liberal arts universities are themselves our answer to why we as a species matter. The implementation of Language, Religion, History, Culture, Literature, into all other disciplines are claims of significance echoing back to the mysterious roots of humanity. Our human nature is a curious and creative one, and the well-rounded liberal arts celebrates it as our existence's justification; we are the universe's students, of everything we cannot measure nor touch, and by this learning, we write what humanity becomes.

¹ "René Descartes." Oxford Essential Quotations. Ed. Ratcliffe, Susan. : Oxford University Press, . Oxford Reference. <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00003567>>.