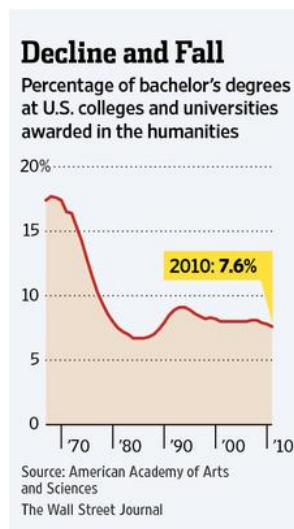A World of Multiplicity and the Core Mission of the Liberal Arts

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I thank Denis Feeney for inviting me to join this conversation. And by this conversation, I mean this conversation in particular. About the liberal arts and its future.

Decline and Fall
Percentage of bachelor's degrees at U.S. colleges and universities awarded in the humanities

2010: 7.6%

Source: American Academy of Arts and Sciences
The Wall Street Journal

Public discussions these days that include the humanities typically start by asking for an explanation of its decline, which is kind of like the old courtroom adage about asking when have you stopped beating your significant other.

It's a much better idea to ignore that particular question since it's based on fundamentally unfair premises.

While it's true, as one will read in the WSJ or see on Fox News, there is a decline in the percentage of humanities majors since 1970, from 17% to 7%, -- leaving it at that ignores three critical points of context that Nate Silver has drawn out in his New York Times column, aided by a timely intervention from Ben Schmidt (who wrote when he was a graduate student in history at Princeton).[1]

First, this is measuring from the top of a bubble. If we chose as our starting point 1960 or 1980, instead of 1970, we'd find a small reduction that looks more like an ebb within a normal range of yearly ebbs and flows, between about 10% and 7% of majors in the humanities. And we'd also notice that since 1980, in other words for the last 34 years, the percentage of degrees awarded in the humanities has been steady.

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[1] Nate Silver, "As More Attend College, Majors Become More Career-Focused," 538 blog, *New York Times*, June 25, 2013; Ben Schmidt, "A Crisis in the Humanities?" The Edge of the American West blog, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 10, 2013.

Humanities degrees boomed as a percentage of all degrees in the 1960s
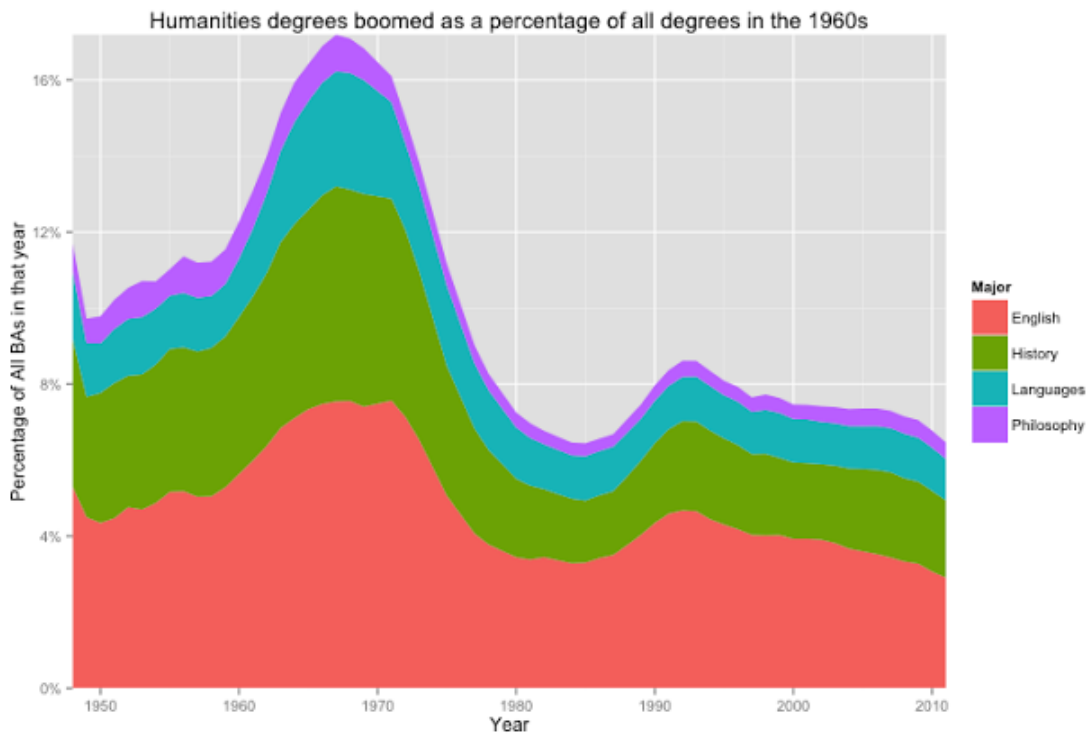
Source: Ben Schmidt

Second, the contraction in humanities majors during the 70s was pretty much matched in other core disciplines, including math and statistics, and history and social sciences. For these fields in the aggregate there is a rough halving of their percentages during the 70s, and then they about hold their own after 1980.

This leads to the third point of context. During the last three decades colleges and universities have widened their missions, substantially. The pool of people pursuing a college degree is swelling with new kinds of populations. In 1940 5% of the population had acquired a bachelors degree or above. By 2009, that proportion increased six-fold to 30% of the population. Much of this rise came from big increases in fields where the expectation of training on the job was offloaded onto higher education during the 70s, which responded, with nimble open-mindedness in fact, to the demand. The biggest of these expanding fields are degrees in criminal justice, business, and the health-related professions (a name the government uses not for pre-med students in bio and organic chemistry, but for those training to be clinical and administrative support staff). I suspect that most of the swelling ranks of undergraduate business degrees are also on their way to the support staff role, engaged in tasks that would have been learned on the job a few decades ago.

With this wider context as background, if we look again at the number of humanities majors being produced, but this time not just against the baseline of a rapidly changing higher ed. population, but against the whole potential college student population in the U.S., we find that the percentage of people being trained in the

humanities has steadily increased since 1950 -- from a little over 1% to about 2.5% now. We still see the bubble in 1970, but it now pushes up through a steadily upward leaning slant. An increasing number of degrees in the humanities are adding to the ongoing swelling of the numbers of college-educated people in the U.S. as a whole.
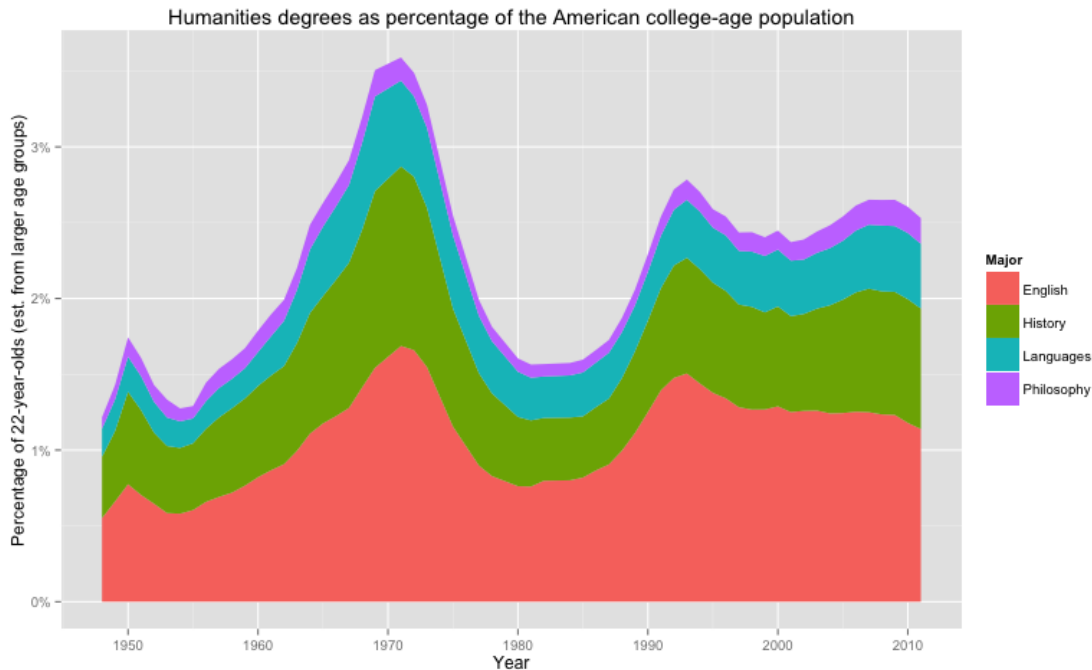
Source: Ben Schmidt

My conclusion from this is that while classical studies faces pressure, it's something we face in common not just with the rest of the humanities but with the STEM fields and the core social science disciplines as well. What's under pressure is the idea of knowledge for it's own sake, and this is the best definition of the liberal arts that I know.

If we focus on winning that particular rhetorical challenge we line ourselves up under the widest arc of those with whom we have common cause.

Better messaging for pure research will give us the best lever to make the case for history, let alone poetry, let alone our own corners of the Mediterranean.

As we all schooled in rhetoric know well, to make the case we need to know the audience. Cultures have their competing goods and times of pressure and change will reveal the master trope. Homer's elevating of a hero who is *polytropos* had to give way to Vergil's *pietas*, and for our aspiring 18-year-old and his or her parents there are a handful of possible master tropes too. On my reading, the quality of being *entrepreneurial* will likely be the winner. It's of course a good thing to be this, what's not to like? But it inspires zeal for its own idiosyncratic cluster of excellences.

For starters it creates a domain where change for it's own sake will be valued and imagined utopias will be robust, where impact is a verb, and being aggressive is an obvious good thing. As for history, in the spirit of preparing for the worst, as Bob Connor has already demonstrated for us, it's wise to think that the observation of Henry Ford may rule the day, and that we'll need some arguments debunking the idea that history is bunk.

On the plus side of the ledger, there are real opportunities too. This is a cultural domain in which values like creativity, ingenuity, and adaptability are going to be among the most salient -- closer to the polytropic hero than the dutiful one.

The leap to making the case for following one's passions, in a language and spirit probably closer to our own hearts, is not as wide as it might be. And we're even within sight of Aristotle who was committed to the idea that we had a built-in nose for wonder, which set about trying to find the most concentrated forms of it, sometimes even despite ourselves. These and other such points of entry hold promise for making the case that the best outcomes, for all the forms of prosperity we cherish most, are going to accrue to those who follow their noses. And if we don't do this? We'll produce a generation of the short-sighted.

When the shifts of the ground under our feet are at their most seismic, intellectual agility is what we will need most, and this is the particular strength of a liberal education. The liberal arts make minds nimble. We've known this and organizations like the Teagle Foundation and the AAC&U now also have the data.

In my view the data is going to be critical. Arguing from anecdotes is a losing strategy for us since it will tip the balance in favor of those with the biggest megaphones. In recent years my own department ran afoul of Rush Limbaugh who found our mission statement on our departmental website risible. My colleagues and I are, apparently, socialists; we are purposefully handing out useless diplomas our students can't read; for high fees; to put them into debt; so they will become welfare dependent; and so fellow socialists, etc.[2] He entertained his vast audience that afternoon with lots of such anecdotes. The best thing we could do is write him an email. No response.

We need to do a better job with our data, uncovering it and publicizing it.

In addition, Bob Connor has already raised perhaps the most promising mode by which we might promote and deepen our message.

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[2]http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2011/11/01/deciphering_the_sad_sack_story_of_a_classical_studies_scholar

When massive online courses arrived, back in the Stone Age of 2012, the froth that was building around them was mostly of the utopian variety, with some bubbles of the toxic kind as well.

The enthusiasms of Silicon Valley and the penny-pinching of those keeping our books and looking for economies of scale were, to take a term of art, becoming synergistic. Penn took an assertive stance toward this. It gave probably the most vigorous embrace among the original four signatories to the Coursera agreement two years ago. The number of universities signed on is now 107.

I had already been experimenting at Penn with online teaching for 10 years previously, and I entered the world of MOOCs with a few surmises.

Most importantly, the medium is not transparent to the message, it shapes it. The particular medium of online teaching is, in fact, based on distraction. A more generous way of putting it would be to say that it lowers the barrier to pursuing nearly any whim of curiosity a person might have. This is undoubtedly a good thing for certain kinds of information-based knowledge, but equally a bad thing for longer-form more thoughtful forms of intellectual work that I think most of us prize most. Any entry into this medium needs to be cognizant of this.

I didn't buy at all that this format was going to turn our work in classrooms upside down. While some were, and still are, cheering on the end of the lecture as we know it, in my estimation, the center of the MOOC experience, a video simulacrum of a live talking head, places a greater emphasis on the core skills of lecturing that have been an important part of our work from the beginning. And even the compressed time required in lecture video clips is not a huge differentiator here. Any good lecture I've ever given has 3 points that take 12 minutes each.

I was also skeptical that the kind of transformative depth of engagement we expect from our best classes would be at all possible in this environment, at scale, as they say in Palo Alto. When I could create intellectual intensity at Penn, even teaching online (always to limited numbers), it was only because of the hard work of close engagement with the students. There was no possibility for this at enrollments of 50,000. I set the bar for what I hoped to accomplish with the MOOC not so much at the level of what we can do in a classroom, but at what we can do on television. Let's replace those History Channel confections with the good stuff.

Now, after teaching on Coursera, I'm still skeptical of the medium and still I don't see this as replacing the lecture class. But the last idea about where the bar should be set for such classes has been challenged. At the end of a real class that has gone well I would hope that some trickle of students will have had not just a good experience but a great one, and that some subsection of those will have done something that changed their lives. Contrary to my expectations, this actually happened in the Coursera course. Statements to the effect came on discussion

boards and in emails over the transom, but they came with all the sincerity of a 19 year old in one's office hours.

This provoked a new thought. I think we will tend overrate the importance of our own magnetic presence in a classroom. As we all know, the point of teaching is to set up an environment that promotes students to do the truly hard and transformative work: putting in the 10s and then hundreds of hours required to read slowly the likes of Homer, Sophocles, Plato, and Vergil. We're at our most effective when giving that nose for wonder a bit of guidance and the wherewithal to win out over our lesser angels. Everything we do is an instrument for that.

To close I point to three reasons to pursue the avenue of online teaching vigorously.

First is the numbers argument. As of last night there are 5.8 million people, discrete users, that have expressed an interest through Coursera's website. This is 42% of the total undergraduate population in American 4-year colleges and universities, public and private.[3] Of course, their expressed interest is only that. It isn't a count of the number willing to do all the hard work that good courses require, but still, it's a huge number saying, I'm interested. What can we do to meet that interest?

Second, online teaching is raising the level of scrutiny on teaching. The ferment from MOOCs at its most productive is spurring a conversation about what works in the classroom. It provokes an inventory of what it is we're doing in there. What's working, what isn't? MOOCs are raising the urgency of such questions.

Third, and to my mind most important, recalls an idea that I (as a good socialist, Mr. Limbaugh) remember from the Gorbachev era: Glasnost. The best antidote to passive misimpressions and deliberate distortions of what it is we do is to throw open the doors. This does it unlike anything that has come along.

We need to repeat the successes of the 1960s and create another boom in interest in the core liberal arts. Within the language of our own time we'll need to talk about unleashing creativity, exploration, and the transformative power of ideas; we'll need to back up that message with data; and we'll need to find the biggest platform from which to make the case for what we do.

I think we have a pretty strong hand to play, and it's time we play it.

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[3] Enrolled students in 4-year colleges and universities: 13.8 million. (http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372)