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Grants Aim to “Reinvigorate the Humanities” by Connecting Them to Career Goals

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One of my favorite (academic) memories of college was sitting around a conference table with eight students and my dynamic philosophy professor discussing existentialism. Those were the days!

Right now, an experience like that seems as inaccessible as Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Being and Nothingness.”

Setting aside the obvious questions around the [viability of the in-person model](#) these days, liberal arts proponents are confronting an equally profound and, well, *existential* dilemma: How can institutions make the liberal arts relevant for the growing number of students pursuing careers in technical fields?

The Teagle Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)

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Learning for Living,” a \$7 million grant program designed to “reinvigorate the role of the humanities in general education on campuses across the country.”

The program aims to give students from all backgrounds the chance to experience the power of the humanities, increase teaching opportunities for faculty, and, most interestingly, provide a “coherent pathway through general education that helps students connect the humanities to their professional aspirations” in fields like business, health and engineering. The initiative will award implementation grants of varying amounts to each funded project, up to \$350,000 over 24 months.

“The humanities are essential for the health of American civic life,” Teagle Foundation President Andrew Delbanco told me. “We want to be a society with an educated citizenry, thriving civic participation, and energy and vitality in the arts.” The new program complements [the foundation’s mission](#) of ensuring that “the benefits of liberal arts education reach students of all backgrounds, including those who have historically been underrepresented in higher education.”

A Revised Argument for the Libera

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It was around this time that proponents, concerned about social media's impact on the body politic, also began exploring how exposure to the humanities could make people more tolerant, compassionate and thoughtful. Despite these arguments, "the liberal arts have been languishing" on many campuses, Delbanco said, "with declining numbers of students choosing a major in the humanities, declining enrollment in the liberal arts, and a growing emphasis on STEM fields." By using the liberal arts, he said, "we can help students develop the skills and values that are essential for a successful life in the 21st century."

X

demoralization of humanities faculty.”

The pandemic and the resurgent movement for racial justice provided a stark reminder that society needs the liberal arts more than ever.

The crises, Delbanco said, “raise many deep questions about the power of words and symbols for good or ill; the responsibility of individuals for the welfare of others; the problem of ambiguity in the realm of science; the parallel contagion of fear—to name just a few. These are issues with which all students, regardless of their professional aspirations, should be given the opportunity to think deeply about as part of their preparation for lives of responsible participation in our democracy.”

Reimagining General Education

Undergraduates get their dose of the liberal arts through general education credits, “the place in the curriculum where students, who now overwhelmingly pursue pre-professional areas of study, should engage with challenging and inspiring works of literature, art and philosophy,” Delbanco said.

Unfortunately, at many institutions, “the impersonal and incoherent character of gen ed—which typically amounts to a few distrib requirements—doesn’t allow much genu

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“something that must be gotten out of the way as fast and as painlessly as possible,” particularly among low-income and first-generation students feeling pressure to enter the workforce.

“Cornerstone: Learning for Living” seeks to bridge this divide by making gen ed more coherent, attractive and attentive to student concerns and career aspirations by linking “transformative texts” to problems in technical fields.

The sponsors modeled the program after the “Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts” certificate at Purdue University. That program, which is designed for all undergraduate students, [consists of two phases](#). The first is a two-semester sequence that provides students with a “foundational knowledge of transformative literature from around the world, as well as fundamental reading, writing, speaking and analytical skills.”

The second phase finds students taking nine hours in “Cornerstone Themes of Cultural Impact and Representation” to add depth to their major. These themes include science and technology, environment and sustainability, healthcare and medicine, management and organization, and conflict resolution and justice.

The foundation’s press release noted th

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credit hours at Purdue’s College of Liberal Arts, and created new opportunities for humanities faculty.”

“These Words Should Matter to Everyone”

Delbanco told me that the overarching goal of “Cornerstone: Learning for Living” is to “help students appreciate that technical problems cannot be addressed exclusively through technical solutions—that everything they will be doing in life takes place in a *human* context.”

The stakes couldn’t be higher. In a recent column ominously titled “[The End of College as We Knew It?](#)” the *New York Times*’ Frank Bruni suggests that the pandemic “provides extra incentive for schools to redirect money from the humanities to the sciences, because that’s where big grants for biomedical research are.”

When I asked Delbanco to provide an example of how a “transformative text” can apply to students pursuing a technical career, he cited the opening of Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man”:

“I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply

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“Anyone who reads—I mean really reads—the opening of ‘Invisible Man’ is shocked into awareness of how easy it is to look through or around other people while failing to recognize their full humanity,” he said.

“Those words should strike the mind and heart of anyone, in any profession—no matter how technical—whose work affects the lives of other people, especially people whose dignity and sense of self-worth has been denied or assaulted. In other words, these words should matter to everyone.”

Liberal Arts for All

Delbanco, who is also the Alexander Hamilton Professor of American Studies at Columbia University, became president of the Teagle Foundation in 2018. From day one, his primary focus has been on ensuring that a humanities education is available to all students.

He cited two additional commitments that support this goal. The first is the foundation’s [Knowledge for Freedom](#) program, which brings underserved high school students onto college campuses over the summer, where they “experience the intensity of a seminar-sized discussion taught by college professors focused on major works of philosophy and literature. Later, students engage in interconnective

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college and securing financial aid.

“Our data show that students served by our programs are more likely to matriculate into and graduate from college and major in the liberal arts compared to their counterparts from their public high schools,” Delbanco said.

The second commitment, [Education for American Civic Life](#), aims to elevate the civic objectives of liberal arts education. Delbanco said that universities “often assume that their incoming students have received prior preparation on fundamental topics such as the formation of the American republic or the drafting of the U.S. Constitution, contention over its meaning, and its amendment over time.”

But this isn’t always the case. As a result, universities “miss opportunities to help undergraduates develop a real understanding of the history and fragility of democracy,” Delbanco said. “We encourage institutions to embed these themes across their curriculum and thereby to foster deeper, more thoughtful and informed inquiry into the critical issues that we must face together as a society.”

The foundation’s new “Cornerstone: Learning for Living” initiative is currently open to community colleges, liberal arts colleges, regional comprehensive institutions and research

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grants to support teaching fellowships for doctoral students, post-doctoral scholars and/or visiting faculty. Planning grants up to \$25,000 over 12 months are strongly encouraged to “lay the groundwork for successful curricular reform and faculty professional development.”

Concept papers for the first round of planning and implementation awards must be submitted by December 1, 2020 at proposals@teagle.org. For additional information, applicants can dial into upcoming Zoom calls on [October 8](#) and [15](#), and check out the “Cornerstone: Learning for Living” [request for proposals](#) and [toolkit for revitalizing the role of the humanities](#) in general education.

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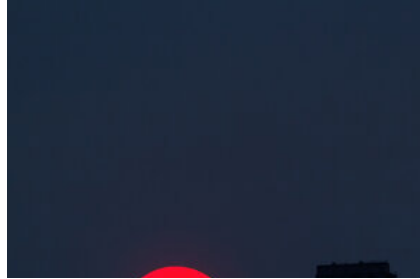
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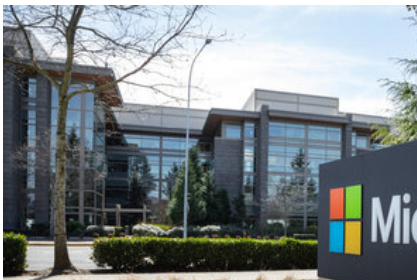
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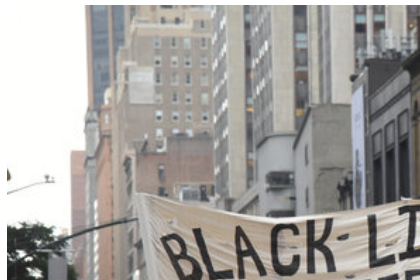
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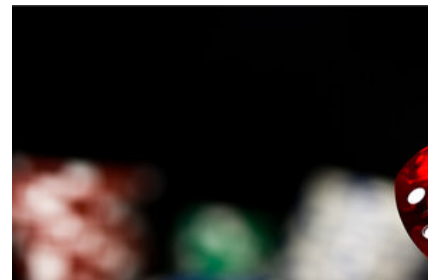
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