

Can We Rebrand the Humanities?

(Spoiler: Yes. We need to.)

As someone who studied both marketing and history (and who finds her history degree a super valuable part of that mix) the question often crosses my mind: “How can I sell my history degree?”

It shouldn't be that hard, really. As a history undergraduate student, I just came out of a program with intensive research and written/oral communication training. I can mine through data about almost any topic, large or small. I can draw conclusions. I can organize the information. If you've read my article on reasons to hire a History student (heck, even if you've spent a few hours in a History seminar), you know the list goes on and on.

When I see the words “B.A. in History,” I see all that.

I just don't think employers always do. That's a problem.

Employers often have no understanding of the **transferable skills** embedded in a liberal arts education. It's like they see my degree and the only thing that comes to mind is their boring high school history teacher from 1971 droning on about the pyramids.

(...I mean, I do also know a whole bunch about the pyramids, but that is beside the point.)

So, here I am. Here we are. Looking at a job market which increasingly demands innovative, engaged, realistic, and skilled employees who can work with people and technology. Wanting to raise our hands and yell “THAT'S ME!” because really, it is. Our degrees should communicate all these competencies to employers. We just spent years building an understanding of processes, politics, humanity itself.

So how do we fix this perception?

It won't happen right away. But I think there are a few subtle changes that institutions, professors, students, and graduates can make to help us rebrand some of these so-called useless degrees.

Here's a start:

- People who studied the humanities and are using skills from those degrees in their jobs should **make the value of their education known** in the workplace. When someone compliments your writing style, your note taking ability, or your problem-solving skills at work, do not shy away from giving honourable mention to the fact that you honed those skills

through a liberal arts education. All the humanities grads making things happen in the world should be walking examples of the value of these degrees.

- We need to create more **portfolio-oriented curriculum**. Many of the educational paths which are considered more “valuable” in workland get that reputation because their graduates have something tangible to show employers. Encourage students present their research in a way that is accessible to those outside of the discipline. Give them something to show at a job interview.

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- Allow people to **specialize in methodology and skillsets, not just places and time periods**. Very few employers care that I “specialized” in 20th century North American cultural history...but a lot of employers care that I “specialized” in using digital tools and blogging to share information, or that I understand how communications and business have evolved over the past century. Did you become an expert in writing, in using a particular primary source, in different types of research or analysis? Consider recognizing these things as your area of “expertise” when speaking with employers.
- Academic institutions need to realize that **not every student wants to continue in academia and that's okay**. Professors automatically assume that their brightest scholars are immediately destined for academic greatness. But what if they are more interested in business, entrepreneurship, or the public sector? If every professor said to themselves “My students are going to come out of this class with **one tangible thing to add to their resume**,” even something as simple as introducing students to one new technology or research method, they would be preparing their students for success wherever they choose to go. Which is very good news, because if we lock all good humanities scholars up in Universities, they will have less of an impact on the world. Who wants that?

- Speaking of entrepreneurship...we also need to encourage students to **create their own projects and jobs**. A liberal arts education helps us understand the culture, economics, and needs in our communities. These are certainly the kinds of people who are equipped to see the direction people are going in (and to make money on that direction). Give students resources and guidance that allows them to see this is a real possibility.
- We need to **encourage interdisciplinary models** in our academic institutions. One of my biggest “aha!” moments in University was when a professor suggested putting spaces frequented by engineering students (such as 3D printing labs) in liberal arts buildings on campus to encourage interaction. As someone who frequently collaborates with techy types in workland, I love this idea. Imagine giving History students an opportunity to work with software engineering students to develop an educational app, or a design student to create a better website to showcase research. Mutual respect and collaboration between fields is necessary outside of academia, so let's start early.
- We need to **connect students with the community**. There are so many organizations who could use the skills humanities scholars have, or who could offer unique resources and projects to students. Working with organizations outside of their school helps students establish networks, explore their own career paths, and build their portfolios/resumes (see point #2). It also allows the community recognize the value that these students have, which can translate into a change in perspective for potential employers.

We have the resources and technology to rebrand the humanities. The Internet gives us the ability to connect with each other like never before. We can talk about the value of our humanities degrees online. We can teach students to recognize exactly why their degree is valuable and prepare them to sell it to an employer (or to create their own business). We can develop interdisciplinary courses and programs which will encourage collaboration and help a humanities student's degree appeal to a wider audience after they are done.

We can rebrand the humanities. We need to. Because it's not just our students who are missing out on jobs...our communities as a whole are missing out on awesome, well-trained talent that can take businesses (and society) to the next level.

Shauna Vert is a Communications Consultant who specializes in historical research and content marketing. Through her business, Shauna helps organizations understand and communicate the past in marketable ways. She works with clients in a variety of sectors including technology, tourism, legal services, First Nations education and non-profits. She can be found through her website at contentcounts.ca. This article was first published on shaunanagins.com.



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