

IMSA Teachers's Thoughts on the State of Humanities and Social Sciences

If the warnings of educators, researchers, and disgruntled postgrad students across the country are to be believed, the humanities and related social sciences are in crisis. Look up “humanities in decline” and you’ll find editorial after editorial lamenting the downfall of such-and-such university’s English department or the dismantling so-and-so program’s anthropology concentration. Worryingly, the statistics seem to corroborate these anxieties. Though the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded in fields such as ancient history, philosophy, theology, and more have fluctuated drastically in the past seventy years, undergraduate enrollment in the humanities has declined by over one-third since the Great Recession, even as the rate of college matriculation continues to climb.¹ Obtaining a degree in the humanities or the social sciences is increasingly seen as conventionally unemployable - meaningless even - and even those with advanced degrees tend to earn less than graduates in other fields.

Is the study of our culture and society, then, doomed to obsolescence? No. It goes without saying that art, literature, history, and social interaction lay at the very heart of what makes us human. They do what no mechanistic science can - they express how it is *to exist*, and they guide us towards a vision of a happier, more just world. To wield science without humanism is to disregard the end of science itself: uplifting humanity.

In this article, we showcase Mr. Kearney, Dr. Cross, and Dr. Kotlarczyk’s perspectives on the humanities and social sciences at IMSA and in the world at large. They argue for the importance of their fields, offer suggestions for education, extracurriculars, and employment, and provide advice for prospective students. Though we attend a math and science academy, their words are a reminder that our future educations and careers need not, and should not, be consigned solely to Feynmann diagrams and indefinite integrals. Our world is far too complex and beautiful to qualify through equations alone.

Why do you think the humanities and social sciences are valuable in general and at IMSA?

Dr. Kotlarczyk

Without the humanities, what do you have? Without literature and history and culture, what holds us, as people, together? American schools have been cutting and minimizing art and music programs for decades, and look where we are. Don't get me wrong, I love and value STEM. Without the humanities, though, we become a soulless technocapitalist culture of Elon Musks and Jeff Bezoss whose only interest in or understanding of humans is discovering the fastest way to take their money. The humanities have the potential to make us better citizens and people. With the rise of fascism and authoritarianism both here and abroad, it's more important than ever to have a citizenry that understands its past and can think critically about it. The fascist and

¹ <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/bachelors-degrees-humanities>

authoritarian movements know this, which is why they're trying so desperately to censor topics like discussions on race and gender, and why they're passing laws to try to control what is and is not taught in schools. Ideas have power. The humanities teach us how to engage with and handle that power, instead of being afraid of it.

Dr. Cross

History, which is what I know most in the humanities, is valuable because it is transformative. It increases cultural literacy and helps us to recognize that the human experience is expansive. It not only helps us to understand others, it also helps us to understand ourselves. History shows how we came to be who we are and why we live the way we do. It shapes us and defines our identities. History, therefore, has the potential to help you become a person of character and an engaged citizen.

History is also useful. As I suggested earlier, it teaches critical thinking skills. But also, because it touches upon all forms of human endeavor from arts and languages to science and economics, history is one of the most versatile undergraduate majors, preparing students for work in education, law, business, media, publishing, and many other fields. Companies often value those with educational backgrounds that set them apart from the crowd. I keep in mind what MSNBC host Rachel Maddow once said: “We need people who are good at explaining facts, who are good at editing, and who can visualize things in creative ways. We need good artists and we need good writers – and history is king of that.”

Mr. Kearney

I always tell my students that I never expect them to go into academic social science. Rather, I know that they will be successful doctors, engineers, scientists or entrepreneurs. With that in mind, however, they cannot escape the fact that they will always be plugged into the world of politics and economics. They need to vote, they need to pay taxes, and the social world will continue to go on around them. As such, I find it incredibly important to expose students to the concepts that political science and economics have to offer. Moreover, I believe that taking courses in game theory or research design affords students the opportunity to think more critically and deliberately about the world. This allows them, I hope, to become more discerning consumers of media and information in a world that is increasingly overwhelming in that regard. Our students at IMSA and their generation more broadly have the ability to enact great change in the world, but it is critically important that they understand how that work works if they wish to do so.

Why did you choose to study your field of scholarship?

Dr. Cross

From childhood I have had a curiosity about ancient civilizations. I was fortunate to have a family that encouraged this. Because of my father's work we traveled often, and wherever we happened to live we always sought out historical landmarks. In this way I gained an education in historical narratives. But it was not until college that I recognized the cognitive value of history. It cultivates critical thinking skills. My freshman year I had a professor who showed me how to collect, evaluate, and arrange a variety of sources into persuasive arguments. I learned that history teaches not what to think but rather how to think. This was an important revelation and I determined to devote my career to it. Throughout my graduate experience, I earned high grades and plaudits from professors and colleagues, all of which reinforced history as the correct path for me. I was fortunate to land a full-time position as a Classicist straight out of graduate school, just as I was to come to IMSA as an Ancient World historian.

Mr. Kearney

My path to Social Science is an interesting one. I was a theater major in undergrad, but I simply was not a good enough actor to make it big. So I became a history teacher and was lucky enough to be offered a job at the high school that I attended. While there, I began to travel more and began to read a lot about international politics. I was blessed that I had some talent with regard to academics, so I decided to apply to graduate school. But I must admit that I had no idea what the academic field of political science actually looked like. I was accepted to a graduate program at Purdue based on my test scores alone. I had never taken a political science course in college nor any math courses since high school. I quickly found out that political science was indeed scientific and that a mere interest in global politics was not enough to be successful. I learned on the fly and realized that if I wanted to pursue the field, I would need to go to a school that focused even more strongly on the scientific and mathematic aspects of the field. I retook the GRE with a focus on my math scores and was accepted at the University of Wisconsin. There, I focused on those math and science aspects of political science; on research design, statistics, methodology and game theory. I never would have imagined that is where my career would have taken me 20 years ago, but I am happy that it has.

Dr. Kotlarczyk

Since I was a little boy, fiction and literature have spoken to me and helped me understand our world in a way that nothing else does. Making a job out of it was a big risk, and one I resisted for a long time (I did not, initially out of college, think I would ever become a teacher or scholar). But for me, sharing my passion for reading and writing has been rewarding, at least so far.

What does the current academic environment surrounding non-STEM fields look like, and why do you think that is?

Dr. Cross

It is no secret that the humanities are best with difficulties. Even before the pandemic, schools were cutting budgets for the humanities, dismissing professors, and even terminating entire departments. My field, Ancient History, has been especially hard hit by low student enrollment and hiring freezes. The most obvious reason for this state of affairs is the relative lack of career opportunities. The most frequent question that I received when I was the Coordinator of Classics at Queens College, CUNY was, "What can I do with a Classics degree?" While it is true that the humanities are not the most lucrative field that one can enter, there are practical applications that one can gain from it that can enhance their professional skillset and give them a competitive edge. Humanities educators, unfortunately, have not always demonstrated this.

Dr. Kotlarczyk

There are a lot of robust communities of discourse in non-STEM fields. That said, there are at the moment some serious threats to non-STEM fields in America coming in the form of curriculum censorship. The anti-"Critical Race Theory" and anti-LGBTQ laws passed recently in places like Texas and Florida are the canary in the coal mine for academic freedom in this country.

Mr. Kearney

I think this is a question that assumes my field of study is non-STEM. I would contest that assumption. Quantitative political science, econometrics, game theory....these are all STEM related pursuits. I would love for more people to understand that.

That being said, I also feel that the question must be answered in two different ways. Within my academic community, my field is highly regarded. Political scientists and economists continue to make contributions to the field and we know more now than ever before about human behavior as it relates to these aspects of civilization. Social scientists are key drivers of policies that affect us all on a daily basis.

Broadly speaking, however, there continues to be a growing lack of respect for and trust in scientists across the board. We have seen this with people's beliefs and reactions to the COVID epidemic, for example, or climate change. We are finding that people who are presented with results and findings with which they don't like are simply willing to label them "fake news" and ignore them. This is particularly problematic in my fields of study since, by definition, our work is political in nature. It is my hope that we can turn the corner on this and return to a world in which we respect the authority of individuals who have dedicated their lives to becoming experts in their fields of study, whatever that field might be. I recognize that some fields, the arts or philosophy for example, are inherently open to interpretation and I do not have a problem with that. It is important that we have interesting conversations about all aspects of life. But I also believe that the more we understand that social scientists are not merely pontificating but rather helping to explain the world around us, the more we can engage in said world and work to make it a better place.

What advice can you offer to IMSA students looking to study fields like history, philosophy, political science, English, etc? What job prospects and career paths are generally available?

Mr. Kearney

I do think we have to be honest with our students that some fields may not have the types of job prospects that one would hope for with the amount of talent that our students possess. I do think that is a sad reflection on the world in many ways. That so many colleges and universities want to offer courses in English or History but refuse to pay for full time professors instead relying on adjuncts who get neither the respect nor compensation that they deserve is disheartening to say the least. That said, it is indeed true that we need more medical doctors in the world than philosophers. I say this with no disrespect intended to those who wish to study philosophy. It is a noble endeavor, but one which is likely to be poorly compensated. I say this from a place of experience. I truly believed that I was going to be an actor when I entered undergrad. But lots of people want to act and there simply aren't enough jobs for them all. Likewise, we probably grant too many PhDs in my field of political science for the number of academic jobs that exist. Many times in my life I have experienced these harsh economic realities.

Never-the-less, it is important to embrace one's passion. Give acting a try, write that novel, philosophize. But do so with the understanding that none of those are sure fire ways to make it rich. Additionally, I think that my particular field offers a number of options that a field like acting does not. While jobs in academic political science are at a premium, federal, state and local governments are always in need of individuals with the skills to do expert political and economic analysis. So are political campaigns and corporations, law offices and financial institutions, news organizations and private research groups. The world needs people who are trained with the skills of data collection, research design and political and economic know-how.

I never became a Broadway actor nor a university professor, but I also do not regret the circuitous path that my life has taken and I am extremely happy with where I ended up.

Dr. Cross

I am partial to ancient history, of course, but, even if you do not choose to pursue history as a career, you can still benefit from a knowledge of it in whatever major you choose. Just ask J.K. Rowling; J.R.R. Tolkien; Chris Martin of Coldplay; Mark Zuckerberg; Jerry Brown, four-term Governor of California; Chuck Geschke, founder of Adobe; and Nobel-prize winner Toni Morrison – all of whom studied ancient history or classics in college. Clearly, ancient history is for the cool kids.

Dr. Kotlarczyk

I would encourage people to double major in something viewed as more traditionally employable. Even if you are passionate about something in the arts, there are risks to making your passion into a profession. For example, you may find when you have to do it every day you're not as passionate as you thought. You might also be disappointed when you find out other people in your field don't share your passion for it. The rewards can be great, too, but they don't come without risks and sacrifices.

How can students get involved in non-STEM academic work, such as writing, producing original research, attending conferences, etc.? What extracurricular opportunities are available on and off-campus?

Mr. Kearney

In political science, however, there are a number of ways to get involved. Right now, I offer an SIR in Econometric analysis for social science. It is my great hope that the administration will continue to allow me to offer this course in the future. It is an opportunity for students to learn about multiple components of social science: research design, hypothesis testing, statistical computing, data collection. I cannot stress enough how much this puts our students at an advantage at the next level of their educational careers. I have taught a similar course to college juniors and seniors and they struggled. Our students who take this SIR and are serious about doing social science research are very well positioned for success. Conference space remains at a premium, given the multitude of social science graduate students and researchers out there, but there is no doubt in my mind that our students have the ability to present at local and regional events.

Dr. Kotlarczyk

The cool thing about being a writer is all you have to do to be a writer is write. Many great writers who we read today had other jobs. Arthur Conan Doyle, who created Sherlock Holmes, was a doctor. So was the poet William Carlos Williams. Wallace Stevens was a lawyer. Kafka worked in insurance. These days, a lot of esteemed and award-winning writers teach, especially in college - Jesmyn Ward, George Saunders, Viet Thanh Nguyen, to name a few. I don't know much about extracurriculars, but if you want to get into non-STEM academic work, start reading, and read everything you can get your hands on. And start writing.

Dr. Cross

Students who would like to conduct extracurricular work should reach out to one of the history and social science teachers. Talk to them about an independent study or SIR project. Each of us teachers are also well connected in our respective fields of expertise and can give specific advice. Check out professional associations, too, since many offer resources to prospective students in their fields. Finally, write up your research and contribute to *Zeitgeist*, so all at IMSA can benefit from the ideas circulating in our community.