

Lack of Humanities options stifling creativity

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Illinois Institute of Technology has seen a recent decrease in the options offered as a mandatory humanities or social sciences course.

Yamen Alshawaf posted on the 'Illinois Institute of Technology: Admitted Undergraduate' page on Facebook, "Does anyone know who is responsible for the humanities classes in IIT, because there is nothing interesting offered this spring semester and only 4 classes are offered (300+) of which, two of them are already closed... What is this?!"

Jacob Wall adds, "I had registered for the Graphic Novels course for Spring 2015. But I can't even find that class anymore. Can they remove a class just like that? I can't even register for Humanities classes that interest me anymore."

The lack of class options is a growing concern for the students at the university. In response to this problem, Brandon Simons is currently working on a project to introduce a course related to material studies as a Humanities course, as a member of the Student Government Organization (SGA). Does his major or specialization relate to material studies in any direct or indirect way? No. One of the responses he received while talking about the possibility of introducing the course was that the Humanities department is removing some of the existing courses due to a cut in budgets

for the department, therefore there is no possibility of adding a Humanities course. The reason for the budget cuts was said to be the diversion of energy and funds towards the technological aspect of the school.

So what would be the benefits of focusing energy and funds towards the technology aspect of the school? I infer that it is based on the logic that if you're good at something, then you should strive to be the best at it. This would give one a single primary focus in life. But there is a fine line which exists between focusing on your interests and a having tunnel vision. By narrowing down the available options in the Humanities course to such an extent, the students are now being geared for tunnel vision.

In the consistently evolving and the now hyper-connected world, university graduates cannot simply fall back on their diplomas and single letters on their transcripts which define their intelligence. In the everyday decision making process and the work environment, one has to rely on what they know—the knowledge and experience they have or had gained outside their major specific courses matters. Humanities courses would be one component of your overall personal growth because it embeds in you a deeper understanding of human nature—why and how people behave the way they do. This skill is constructive in a work environment while interacting with a range of people.

If focus on technology is the reason funding has been cut down for the Humanities Department, Digital Humanities should have been considered as an option. Scholars at Stanford University are working on humanities projects using tools like 3-D mapping, geospatial systems, electronic literary analysis, digitization, and advanced visualization techniques in their research.

Apart from giving students a deeper understanding of the human thought process and giving them the tools required to analyze difficult situations, what else does humanities do? The human brain has the capacity for an extraordinary level of creativity, which is undermined by the shifting of fine line, which differentiates specialization from a tunnel vision. For students who aim to be the future innovators and leaders in their field, narrowing down their options simply leads to creating a tunnel vision, giving them fewer opportunities for those possible "Eureka" moments.

An article in the New York Times by Verlyn Klinkenborg discusses the undermining of humanities as a course in higher education as well: "The teaching of the humanities has fallen on hard times. Undergraduates will tell you that they're under pressure—from their parents, from the burden of debt they incur, from society at large—to choose courses they believe will lead as directly as possible to good jobs. Too often, that means skipping the humanities."

Howard Thurman said, "Don't ask

yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Isn't that what our courses are supposed to be about? A series of progressive options from which we, as definers of our own life can choose from, and not a narrow set of pre-defined mandatory classes. I say mandatory, because based on the limited options in humanities and the schedule of courses related to our majors, we do not have much of an option.

Humanities as a mode of learning should be and can be so much more than just a set of mandatory readings each student has to undergo as a rite of passage during their educational development at Illinois Tech. It is the perfect mode to explore and understand the human experience. A course in another language might help me gain appreciation for a different culture. Reading a book about a completely different side of life might help me empathize with people and understand them while assessing situations. Interacting with different materials might give me the joy of experimenting and understanding them while making their possible application in my own major.

As Klinkenborg said, "Writing well isn't merely a utilitarian skill. It is about developing a rational grace and energy in your conversation with the world around you."

In conclusion: Options matter. Personal growth matters. Humanities courses matter.

Student Impressions on Leadership Academy Seminar

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On one of the many Saturday mornings of this semester, I woke up early enough to attend the Leadership Academy Seminar titled "Do You Have the Courage Needed to Lead?" at 10 a.m. This seminar was one of the many effective programs organized by the Leadership Academy at Illinois Tech to prepare students to be the future trailblazers, innovators, and trendsetters.

Approximately 45 students attended the seminar, and they were divided into seven groups for small-scale discussion. After a few minutes of discussion within their seven-person groups, the 45 students got together for a large-scale discussion facilitated by the speaker. This discussion system helped make sure each person contributed significantly in the learning process while getting a diverse range of opinions out. Assumptions were challenged and one got to better understand the psychology behind courage with case studies as people shared stories and real life situations.

So, what are some of the characteristics of courageous leaders? They have courage – of course they do. But they have other essential qualities. They try, experiment, make mistakes, fall, get up, learn and try again, all in a perpetual cyclic motion. They have the persistence and durability to never give up. They learn to trust others because sometimes, it is important to take charge of that inner control freak and suppress it with all that you have. In a team, the ultimate work has to be an amalgamation of each person's thought process and not just a result of your one-man army work.

While interacting with other people, one usually comes across people difficult to interact with, and they can be loosely classified as the resisters, wobbly people, the gossipers, the blamers, the victims, the pessimists and the complainers. Now how would you face the situations these people bring up? Would you let somebody else take charge, run away, give up, or would you assess the situation analytically before coming up with multiple prototype strategies? This is a rhetorical question: I would strongly encourage assessing the situation before coming up with multiple strategies.

Let's delve a bit more into what these people do:

The resister opposes most options based on their impracticality. The wobbly people sway between options and face difficulties while making concrete choices. The gossipers tend to speak while exaggerating facts or speak based on assumptions without concrete facts. The victims feel personally victimized by a situation or person. The pessimists focus primarily on the negative side of the situation, while often bringing the team spirit down. The complainers tend to complain a lot without analytically counteracting the issues they face. All these people bring down the team spirit by imparting their own negative energy to others in the group.

The group came up with the response: Understand the people who you think are having a negative impact on you. It is quick and inconsiderate to assume people's reasoning and be swayed to extreme conclusions without analyzing the different situations and sides. The scale of the negativity needs to be considered as well – if the form of negativity occurs on a large scale, an alteration should be made in the leading system and work process in addition to counteracting the people at the individual scale.

Motivate people intrinsically. Establish a personal and emotional connection with the people you meet. The first time I learned that one of the top architectural firms in Chicago, Gensler, would take its employees out for dinner every Friday, I didn't understand the reason behind it. My high school professor said that everything, including people's actions, has a reason behind it. Well, he used the term "motive", but the sentence just sounds wrong with that word. He didn't mean it in a negative way, and I can say that because I learned to understand him. You see, sometimes you have to understand not only what you say, but how other people interpret it. Other people's interpretation of your actions depends on how well they know you. And how well they know you depends on whether or not you spend each Friday evening with them having dinner. Thus, what Gensler did was to get its employees to interact so they would understand each other and thus yield more productive results while spending at least 40 man-hours together each week.

Over time, I have learned a bit about my thought process. My intensity of procrastination is inversely proportional to my degree of motivation. The factors that affect my motivation are my main goal, the rea-

son for my work and the people I work with. In order to work effectively with people, I need to know how they think and what motivates them intrinsically. I have often been told to separate my work life and "personal" life. But that never worked for me. I think that if a person attempts to maintain different images on different days of the week for different people, they end up with multiple images of themselves without realizing which one is their true authentic self.

Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, summarizes it best: "The workplace is an especially difficult place for anyone to tell the truth, because no matter how flat we want our organizations to be, all organizations have some form of hierarchy. What that means is that one person's performance is assessed by someone else's perception. This is not a setup for honesty. When you're the leader, it is really hard to get good feedback and honest feedback, no matter how many times you ask for it."

One trick I've discovered is that I try to speak really openly about the things I'm bad at, because that gives people permission to agree with me, which is a lot easier than pointing it out in the first place. All of us, and especially leaders, need to speak and hear the truth. Truth is better used by using simple language."

In conclusion to the importance of courage in leaders, stress was laid on the importance of honest and true feedback. There will be times when other people give you feedback, and this often seems like criticism. Accept it – ultimately you are a human being going through a learning process. Constructive criticism helps one grow as a person.

Ethics has a huge say in the decision-making system of a person, based on their nature and their set of values. The previous seminar conducted by the Leadership Academy focused on the role of ethics in the making of a leader. It was brought back in this one to be discussed, questioned and connected to courage in leadership.

Adolf Hitler had courage, and the ability to inspire people. These two qualities gave him the power to make significant changes and a powerful impact. But did he notice and consider other people's perspectives? Did he measure his impact on a much larger scale than his own country? Maybe not. This is a case where analyzing and assessing the situation with other people's perspectives

in mind might have helped to a significant extent before coming to a rapid conclusion. A level of emotional maturity is required to foresee such situations, measure the impact level and consider other perspectives. As a leader with courage, you will have the power to make changes. But without ethics and emotional maturity, courage alone does not make a leader.

What qualities do leaders possess as a whole? They are the tightrope walkers who create a balance between persistence and flexibility. Not only do they realize the importance of honest and true feedback, but also the need to speak up in order to make your opinions heard. Know what's going on around you – be cognizant. Think on your feet and be decisive. Put yourself through an independent thought process. While you make sure that you consider each person's opinion, you cannot allow your choices to be dictated by them. As mentioned earlier, you have to understand not only what you're saying, but how your words are being interpreted by the other person.

While providing criticism, it is important to provide constructive criticism which leads to an increase in positive energy and productivity and not a decrease in the team spirit. How do you better yourself to have the positive energy instead of the negative? Metathinking becomes important in order to understand your own thought process and become more productive as a result. When do you stand up for your beliefs easily and when do you not? What inspires you? What makes you strive to be the go-getter? Learn to recognize your thought process and decision making patterns.

The mind is trained to make quick decisions after a careful thought process over a period of time, while consciously taking case studies into account; it helped me connect the dots between the decisions I made, the human thought process, and my possible future decisions by encouraging the concept of metathinking. The seminars hosted by the Leadership Academy prepares students at Illinois Tech for the evolving, hyperconnected world – it checks your ability to communicate authentically, inspires you to push yourself harder and teaches you to work smart.

The question is: Was waking up early on a Saturday morning worth it? Definitely.