

Miami Herald

Posted on Wed, Aug. 28, 2013

Don't neglect the humanities

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As the school year begins, a vital national discussion about education has been ignited by a commission of prominent Americans, including two of Florida's top educators.

Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón and University of Miami President Donna Shalala co-authored in June a timely and alarming report. It declared that learning and teaching in the humanities and social sciences — literature, history, philosophy, ethics, languages and sound literacy — is woefully inadequate and that this represents a threat to democratic life.

Padrón and Shalala were joined in producing *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive and Secure Nation* by, among others, the presidents of Duke, Harvard, Stanford, Notre Dame and George Washington, and current or former heads of Boeing, Adobe Systems and Lockheed

Martin.

“How do we understand and manage change if we have no notion of the past?” the report asks. “How do we understand ourselves if we have no notion of a society, culture or world different from the one in which we live?”

Why the urgency about the humanities?

- Only one in 10 eighth graders nationwide possesses an adequate understanding of the Constitution's separation of powers, and less than half can explain the Bill of Rights.
- Education in civics is not required in more than half of U.S. states, and more than 70 percent of public high school students are taught history by a teacher without a degree and certification in the subject.

- The percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities has dropped by almost half since 1960 (from 14 percent to 7.5 percent).
- A current proposal in Congress would halve the \$150-million budget of the National Endowment of the Humanities, at the same time that more than \$3 billion is being sought for a wide variety of federal STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) programs.
- A gubernatorial task force in Tallahassee, citing the need for "return on investment" from public education dollars, has recommended that the state subsidize students majoring in vocationally driven "strategic fields," STEM subjects such as engineering and biotechnology, effectively penalizing other subjects.

Society's "return" on its education investment must be broad, inclusive of learning and training that is essential to the health, welfare and vibrancy of our democracy. The economic value of STEM is unquestioned, but so is the civic importance of adaptive skills of literacy and the informed, lifelong citizenship.

Teachers of history, language, civics and world cultures require training just as STEM instructors do. At a time when government and public debate are more and more dysfunctional, polarized and ignored — and the economy also needs building — the humanities and STEM are both wise investments.

"The humanities and social sciences . . . go beyond the immediate and the instrumental to help us understand the past and the future," write Padrón, Shalala and the others.

"They are necessary and they require our support in challenging times as well as in times of prosperity. They are critical to our pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, as described by our nation's founders."

This is true across all school grades and ages. As Padrón states: "Half of the undergraduates in America are in community colleges; they are the great equalizers . . . If there is one area where the social sciences and the humanities are important, more than the Ivy Leagues, more than the Smithsonian, it is right there, where the masses of Americans have their first chance to achieve the American dream."

Self-government is complex and difficult. In diverse, heterogeneous Florida, we know that governing ourselves demands a foundation of literacy and degree of civic understanding, a foundation in the humanities, which is the glue that makes our country one, from many (E Pluribus Unum, you know).

Andy McLeod is a former member of the Florida Humanities Council Board. This article is provided by the Florida Humanities Council as part of the state's 500th anniversary commemoration.