TRANSFORMING HUMANITIES EDUCATION FOR STUDENT CAREER READINESS:

A Guide for Faculty and Librarians

GALE | HIGHER ED DIVE

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"Can Humanities Survive the Budget Cuts?" [1]

That *New York Times* headline captures the fatalistic tone that higher education faculty and librarians have grown accustomed to.

To be sure, the humanities face challenges. Business fields now award more than twice as many bachelor's degrees as the humanities do; the sciences, more than four times as many.[2] As a result, many humanities departments and libraries have seen their budgets and staff slashed.[3]

But the humanities can survive. In fact, they can thrive. Humanities should be indispensable to 21st-century higher education, and data shows that they're certainly crucial to the workforce.

This playbook explores how faculty and librarians can enhance the humanities' relevance, preserving the best of a broad liberal education while preparing students for the modern workforce. They can do so by fostering three in-demand skills: **data literacy, critical thinking,** and **information literacy.**

Sharpening these skills benefits students, humanities departments, libraries, and the institution as a whole.

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THE 3 COMPETENCIES EMPLOYERS CONSIDER MOST IMPORTANT FOR CAREER READINESS

- Communication
- Teamwork
- Critical thinking

THE TOP 3 ATTRIBUTES EMPLOYERS LOOK FOR ON A RÉSUMÉ

- Problem-solving skills
- Ability to work in a team
- Written communication skills

Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers

WHY THE HUMANITIES REMAIN VITAL FOR HIGHER ED INSTITUTIONS, STUDENTS, AND EMPLOYERS

Pundits and politicians dismiss the humanities as impractical, their degrees as "worthless."[4] Even students drawn to the humanities may feel pressure to pursue a STEM or business major.[5]

But the arguments against the humanities are misleading. Although STEM graduates tend to earn higher starting salaries than humanities majors, the pay gap narrows over time.[6] Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows, for example, that the median annual earnings for history majors ($65,000) nearly match the median annual earnings for majors in all fields ($66,000).[7]

Likewise, Harvard economist David Deming explains that **"a liberal arts education fosters valuable 'soft skills' like problem-solving, critical thinking, and adaptability."**[8] Those skills are ones that employers consider essential to success on the job but struggle to find in recent graduates.[9]

In fact, the 2024 Job Outlook survey from the National Association of Colleges and Employers asked employers to rate the importance of career readiness competencies on a scale of 1 to 5. The competencies employers rank most highly are communication (4.55), teamwork (4.49), and critical thinking skills (4.48). But on a 5-point scale of proficiency, the same employers give recent graduates only a 3.62 for communication, a 3.90 for teamwork, and a 3.77 for critical thinking.[10]

Little wonder, then, that more and more businesses recruit humanities majors. BlackRock's COO recently said that the investment management firm needs **"people who majored in history, in English—in things that have nothing to do with finance or technology."**[11]

Humanities students flourish in the tech sector, too. Google expanded its hiring practices after reviewing more than fifteen years of employee data. The company determined that STEM expertise was the least important among eight qualities of top employees.[12]

Brin Enterkin is one of those students flourishing in the tech sector. She pursued a liberal arts education as an undergraduate at Berry College, but now more than a decade into her career, she works at Google. Enterkin's role requires technical knowledge in machine learning, artificial intelligence, and other areas. She's grateful, however, for her liberal arts education, which taught her how to "break down complex problems into smaller, more manageable components." She also notes the importance of critical thinking, saying, "I am constantly required to think beyond the text in front of me, to think deeply about circumstances that require diverse perspectives and empathy rather than a binary resolution."

Enterkin is not an outlier in her industry, either. She explains: “A liberal arts education equips individuals with a diverse skill set that is highly valuable in the tech industry. At Google, there’s a deep need for people who not only are technically capable but also feel comfortable with—and can even thrive in—ambiguity. In my experience, liberal arts majors are trained to adapt and show resilience in changing circumstances. This flexibility is invaluable in the fast-paced tech industry, where innovation, speed, and strong analytical thinking are essential.”

These workplace realities create an opportunity for faculty and librarians to help students hone transferable skills.

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>
> **Brin Enterkin**
> Testing Manager, Google

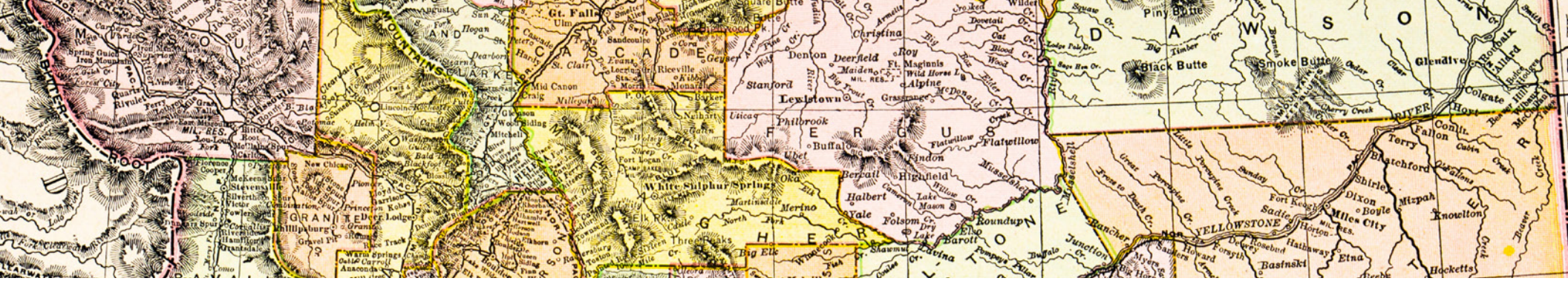
THREE CRUCIAL CAREER SKILLS

Faculty and librarians have a strong opportunity to preserve the best of the humanities while building 21st-century skills.

A recent survey by Gale, a global provider of research and learning resources, shows that higher ed faculty and librarians are attuned to the need to support workforce readiness. In the survey, **54%** of faculty and librarians identify "imparting transferable skills" as the most important attribute on which institutions should focus, receiving more than twice as many votes as any other attribute.[13]

FACULTY AND LIBRARIANS CAN HELP STUDENTS MOST BY FOCUSING ON DEVELOPING THESE TRANSFERABLE SKILLS:

- Data literacy
- Critical thinking
- Information literacy



SKILL ONE

DATA LITERACY

Data literacy, defined by Harvard Business School as "an individual's ability to read, understand, and utilize data in different ways,"[14] is no longer optional.

In a global survey, 82% of business leaders said they "expect at least basic data literacy from all employees."[15] While only 40% of employees worked closely with data in 2018, that number will approach 70% in 2025.[16] The rise of artificial intelligence has increased this demand.

So how can faculty and librarians help humanities students strengthen their data literacy?

Demystify data

Before students can learn data literacy through digital humanities, faculty and librarians need to embrace the idea.

Getting that buy-in can prove challenging, says Kaitlyn Tanis, a history and social sciences librarian at the University of Delaware. "As humanists, we tend to shy away from data," she says. "Some faculty hesitate to engage in digital humanities projects that involve data." Likewise, "many librarians feel they don't have the skills to talk about data literacy."

Tanis helps both librarians and faculty grow comfortable with data in her workplace. She starts by emphasizing that "everyone uses data," Tanis also runs workshops where librarians and faculty work with datasets and data-analysis tools to increase their confidence.

Integrate digital humanities projects into courses

Jess Ludwig works with librarians and faculty worldwide as Gale's director of product management for digital humanities. Ludwig advises librarians to "dig into the course catalog to find classes where teaching and research tools can support learning objectives." She adds, "We see much higher engagement with digital humanities—and much greater benefit to students—when librarians explain to faculty the relevance of digital offerings to their teaching."

82% of business decision makers expect all their employees to have at least basic data literacy

70% of employees work closely with data, as of 2025

Source: Forrester Research

Teach the components of data literacy

Data literacy encompasses several skills. Effective digital humanities projects ask students to exercise each of these skills. Students should learn to:

- **Access, evaluate, and use data:** The digital humanities teach students not to accept data blindly, Ludwig points out. In evaluating sources, they need to ask such questions as: Where does the material come from? What limitations might exist? Why were these particular sources selected? Could issues with digitization affect the quality of the data? Should considerations of privacy, ethics, or copyright affect how the data is used?[17]

- **Manage data:** Before students can analyze data, they need to determine how best to structure and visualize it. Those new to working with data will need time to learn this skill.

- **Analyze data:** Students need practice breaking down data into its principal parts using data analysis tools such as data-mining tools, statistical analysis tools, and data visualization tools. Through experimentation, they can come to see the benefits and limitations of each while learning that what they analyze and how they analyze it influences their research results.

SKILL TWO

CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking consistently ranks at or near the top of the list of competencies that employers seek. While this skill has always been central to the humanities, faculty and librarians can better hone critical thinking into a transferable skill to the workplace by offering digital humanities projects to sharpen it.

Teach students to interrogate sources

Evaluating the reliability of data is an exercise in critical thinking. As Ludwig explains, "Students need to interrogate the source: the tone, the voice, the reliability of the data. They learn to ask questions about both the credibility of sources and the technology used to create and mine the data."

Similarly, Tanis says, "With digital humanities datasets, students learn to ask: Who created this? What biases might exist? What is missing from the data?"

Such questions have not always arisen in traditional humanities. As one scholar summarized the research literature, "students unquestionably accepted the authority of textbooks" and failed to recognize the "unspoken and often invisible authority" of professors who selected course readings.[18]

"Assessing the quality of a source matters whether it's a news outlet or a TikTok video," Tanis says. "Students learn to be engaged citizens and thoughtful information consumers."

Use primary sources

As extensive research has shown, primary sources do an especially good job of fostering critical thinking.[19]

Why? A scholar writing for the Library of Congress explains: "Primary sources are often incomplete and have little context. In analyzing primary sources, students move from concrete observations and facts to questioning and making inferences about the materials. Students must use prior knowledge and work with multiple primary sources to find patterns. Integrating what they glean from comparing primary sources with what they already know, and what they learn from research, allows students to construct knowledge and deepen understanding."[20]

Faculty may have access to primary sources they're not even aware of, and should reach out to the library to find out which resources are available to them.

Encourage students to create their own digital humanities projects

Advanced students can design their own digital humanities projects. Developing such a project, Tanis says, involves "critically analyzing sources to determine their credibility, how they advance your scholarship, what should be included, what shouldn't, and what gaps you need to fill."

Ludwig observes that it takes critical thinking to determine research questions and decide how each source "relates to the whole you're trying to create."

> *"With digital humanities, students learn to ask questions about both the credibility of sources and about the technology used to create and mine the data."*
>
> **Jess Ludwig**
> Director of Product Management
> for Digital Humanities, Gale

SKILL THREE

INFORMATION LITERACY

In a world awash in content and data, information literacy, or the ability to determine the truth and usefulness of information, has never had more value. It draws on research, critical thinking, communication, and data literacy. But higher ed's traditional information literacy programs haven't always prepared graduates well for the modern workplace.

In a report synthesizing more than a decade of empirical research, Project Information Literacy suggests that faculty typically emphasize academic research. This practice "artificially divides the world of information into two separate spheres: information for school (which almost by definition is unlikely to be relevant after graduation), and everything else."[21]

The report adds, "We found a considerable mismatch between the efficient search habits recent graduates practiced in college and the workplace reality where research is a fast-moving, intensive, reiterative, indeterminate, and social process."[22]

To span the divide, here are a few ways faculty and librarians can help students strengthen the transferable skill of information literacy:

Build bridges within your institution

The demand for 21st-century information literacy skills creates an opening for libraries and faculty to work together.

Many faculty members want students to build transferable skills but remain unsure how to proceed. For example, Project Information Literacy's research shows that professors support information literacy but "feel uncertain about venturing beyond" the training they received in their specific discipline.[23]

Librarians stand ready to help. As a librarian at a large university, Tanis has found that many professors don't "know about certain learning resources available through the library." She adds, "Sometimes faculty don't realize that librarians can help teach students how to analyze and think critically about sources."

The key, then, is for faculty to connect with librarians, and likewise for librarians to reach out to faculty. Many studies have documented the positive effects that faculty–librarian collaboration has on students' information literacy.[24]

Face-to-face meetings are worth the time investment, Tanis says. Literacy modules, which some higher ed institutions offer or even require, also offer a chance for librarians to engage with faculty and students. And video tutorials and research guides provide on-demand support.

Librarians can also host workshops and webinars. "Whenever librarians offer a webinar about a learning tool or research platform, we see real engagement with that tool," Ludwig says.

These examples underscore a point made in one study: "Most of the time, these collaborations emerged from librarians proactively seeking out opportunities to partner with individual faculty members and working to develop relationships with departments."[25]

No matter who initiates the partnership, faculty–librarian collaboration offers a path to success.

Invest in teaching and learning tools as well as research platforms

In the Gale survey, faculty and librarians say that libraries can help build career-readiness skills by investing in teaching, learning, and research tools and platforms.

Digital humanities tools allow students to hone workforce-ready skills during their coursework. And access to advanced research platforms supercharges the development of critical thinking, data analysis, and other elements of information literacy.

Of course, investing in such tools won't come easily in a time of tight budgets. But Tanis points out that digital humanities projects don't necessarily mean big spending. "So many of these projects are open access," she says, "meaning that students can examine collections and data that would have been behind a paywall previously."

Here again, faculty–librarian collaboration can make a huge difference. "The partnership between faculty and librarians becomes even more important when budgets are limited," Ludwig says. "It's so important for librarians to know what faculty are doing in the classroom and then be able to draw a line from a new tool or platform directly to the faculty's teaching objectives."

Encourage collaboration

According to employers, many recent graduates struggle with research because they seem unwilling "to consult non-digital sources, such as turning to people for information."[26]

Digital humanities projects are collaborative. These projects "require much more coordination and communication" than a research paper, Ludwig explains. In that sense, the experience better prepares students for what they'll encounter in the workplace.

> *"Most of the time, [successful faculty–librarian] collaborations emerged from librarians proactively seeking out opportunities to partner with individual faculty members and working to develop relationships with departments."*
>
> **Jill K. Becker et al.**
> "Incentivizing Information Literacy Integration:
> A Case Study on Faculty–Librarian Collaboration"

THE COMMON THREAD: FACULTY–LIBRARIAN COLLABORATION

Despite budget constraints and declining humanities enrollment, faculty and librarians can make a meaningful impact by teaching skills that transfer to the workplace such as data literacy, critical thinking, and information literacy.

Fostering excellence in all three skills requires faculty–librarian collaboration. And while relationship-building isn't always easy, it can certainly pay off many times over.

As Ludwig puts it, "When the faculty–librarian partnership is strong, you see really exciting research and teaching happen."

Through strong working relationships, faculty and librarians will prepare students for the modern workforce, strengthen humanities education, and solidify their vital positions at their institutions.

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