

A-Section

These academic disciplines risk forgetting their core task

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The Washington Post, 14 June 2026, 836 words, English

This month, a committee of scholars convened by [Vanderbilt University](#) released a report on the state of humanities and social sciences scholarship across the United States.

The report assesses the extent to which scholarship has been compromised by a priori commitment to activism or political goals. Indeed, when [Daniel Diermeier](#) and Andrew D. Martin, the respective chancellors of Vanderbilt and Washington University, initiated the investigation in 2025, they were responding to “the dramatic erosion of support for the humanities and humanistic social sciences among students, parents, and government officials.”

As one of the signers of the report, I am all too familiar with the fact that activist scholars sometimes play fast and loose with logic and evidence to justify conclusions dictated in advance by a political program. Those who dissent can risk serious damage to their careers. Journals have been forced to apologize for research they have published — not because of poor logic or manufactured evidence, but because the results were politically unacceptable.

The report cites an instance in 2017, when a leading feminist philosophy journal, *Hypatia*, published an article arguing that the case for a person's gender to be determined by inner gender identity could also apply to race. In response, over 800 people signed an open letter demanding an apology from the editorial board for harming “the most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppressions.” Rather than replying that the objection did not address the article's arguments, the editorial board, hat in hand, offered “a profound apology ... for the harms that the publication of the article on transracialism has caused.”

Some disciplines are more corroded than others. Anthropology seems to have largely abandoned the idea of truth independent of political utility, while analytic philosophy has generally maintained high standards. My own field of expertise, literary studies, is somewhere in between. The report is careful to avoid painting with a broad brush. But no matter where on the spectrum a field falls, the damage to public opinion affects all humanistic scholars.

It has long been fashionable among humanist academics to maintain that there is no such thing as objective truth and therefore no neutral standard to violate. Everything is political, and so any call for objectivity is a sham motivated by political concerns. All knowledge merely expresses the interests of a group.

The report provides examples. One pair of animal studies scholars wrote, “the academy has to accept, at least in principle, that all research is ideological and that claims to neutrality in research are nonsensical.” The call for objectivity in social science, says a psychology scholar, is a way “to sanctify the ideology of white supremacy.” A critical race theorist endorses the discovery that “the truth is that there are many truths, all of which are dependent on the perspective that the truth seeker brings. ... Truth, then, is profoundly subjective.”

But if there is no objective truth — if all discoveries are already supplied by prior political commitments — why have university research at all? The point of research is to discover the unknown or to challenge the supposedly known, not to find new ways to affirm what is already accepted. If medical research vindicated only existing treatments, who would fund it? These scholars do not seem to appreciate that they have offered strong reasons to eliminate the humanities altogether.

That, of course, would be a mistake. History, philosophy and literature help people explore complex questions of value and meaning; consider what constitutes a worthy life; acquire facility in ethical reasoning; and refine “our conception of what is possible for human beings,” as the report says. The task of the humanities, it continues, “is not to manipulate us into following a party line but to provide each free person with the tools for making their own informed choices.”

The report limits itself to scholarly research. But it is vital to consider as well how these academic trends have affected undergraduate teaching. Students have traditionally studied literary masterpieces so they can learn from humanity's keenest observers while developing skills to comprehend other such works in the future. If students in college do not develop the habit of acquiring wisdom found in literary and cultural monuments, when will they ever do so? Confined to an island of the present moment, with no appreciation of how people might think in times or places other than their own, students would be blinded to the human condition.

Usually, when an academic department strays from its proper goals, outside experts in the field can devise a remedy. But that won't work if the field itself has been corrupted.

The report urges extreme caution, but it also points out the need for action. Faculty are called upon right the ship of their disciplines. If they remain silent, others — who may care less for the humanities — will step into the breach.

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Document Identifier: WP00000020260613em6e000e0