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Increased Awareness, Increased Appreciation

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Increased Awareness, Increased Appreciation

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Larry Andrews's article "The Humanities Are Dead! Long Live the Humanities!" addresses and solidifies the notion that, at least from the standpoint of academicians, the humanities are alive and well. We need to approach the matter from a student's viewpoint, however. Every university and community college that I know of requires some humanities study at least in the first two years, but it often ends with two courses for a two-year school and maybe three at a four-year institution. The claim by the Stanford Humanities Center that "The humanities can be described as the study of how people process and document the human experience" points to the necessity for awareness of other cultures and other people's experiences in a world of diverse populations. The lack of this awareness may be partly responsible for the ever increasing rate of terrorism and hate crimes. Certainly, those perpetrators seem to lack an awareness and appreciation of cultures other than their own.

What the world needs is more exposure to the humanities, which should be required at an earlier stage than high school or college. Some progress has been made in this direction, as noted by the DC Arts and Humanities Education Collective:

In 1998, representatives from DC Public Schools (DCPS), arts organizations, and charitable enterprises recognized a void and embraced a common goal: They wanted Washington's rich cultural resources to be accessible to all of the District's teachers and students, especially those in low-income neighborhoods.

Such a step in the right direction is feasible in a major city like Washington, D.C., which provides a vast and free wealth of access to cultural institutions, and all cities across the world should follow suit. However, the key problem is our grasp of the phrase "cultural awareness" with its assumption that all cultures feel the same as we do. As we are becoming more and more painfully (and fatally) aware, many countries have an avid desire to keep their cultures as insular as possible. They actively do not want exposure or understanding to anything that is "other." Our focus, then, not only in the U.S. but world-wide, should be creating discussions and pedagogies geared toward opening dialogues and engendering an understanding of the differences in our cultures. Often we are too centered on diversity as a buzzword, and, rather than just tolerance, we should be discussing acceptance and appreciation.

One of the most interesting components of this lack of cultural awareness was the subject of a recent *Morning Edition* on National Public Radio about the Charlie Hebdo incident. David Folkenflik pointed out that mockeries of religious figures or belief systems are often made out of ignorance and are a cultural insult to other groups of people. He argued that, if people were more culturally aware of what they are doing, international incidents could be avoided. He also pointed out that—because America has a more diverse population than, say, France—American publishers might be a bit more hesitant to publish material that is outright insulting to a religious or cultural community (*South Park* notwithstanding).

I believe that a broader base of learning, an increased awareness of diverse beliefs, or, in other words, more exposure to the humanities is essential to the health and well-breeding of the citizens of our world. Schools should not be reducing the required humanities credits but increasing them, and at earlier and earlier junctures. Only then might we have a hope of growing into a civilized populace.

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