

Defying the decline: professors keep humanities alive

*“We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.” —
Dead Poets Society*

[Robin Williams’ character](#) in “Dead Poets Society” teaches his students the importance of humanities through poetry, self-expression and what it means to be human. He helps them understand there is beauty in art.

He inspires his students to look at life, not just logically, but also with perspective that there is more to life than math and science.

Humanities — the study of the human experience and society — [encompasses](#) exploring humankind through art, literature, philosophy, culture, history, performing arts, journalism and music.

However, despite that broad scope, the number of humanities graduates decreased [16%](#) from 2012 to 2020.

While humanities graduates are decreasing in number, science, technology, engineering and math fields have increased by 56% over the same period of time. This is exactly what’s happening at [Utah Tech University](#).

This drop is either attributed to lack of employment rates or lower pay compared to STEM fields. However, when looking at the statistics, [employment rates](#) for STEM fields are almost identical to humanities. There's been a crisis in media and academia settings surrounding the so-called "[death of the humanities](#);" but not all of it is accurate or [fairly represented](#).

Because humanities graduates are becoming fewer in numbers, Dr. Ami Comeford, professor of English at Utah Tech, said the spread of false narratives is unsettling. An article in the *New Yorker* last year called, "[The End of the English Major](#)," was an eye-opener.

"That was definitely a wake up to a lot of us; to say we really need to face this head on and be a little bit more proactive about communicating our values and the value of what they do," she said.

Humanities is undeniably decreasing in college graduates. But it's not extinct. The passion for humanities and the arts is still alive and thriving among students and professors across the globe.

At Utah Tech, our professors channel their passions for their niche in the humanities and arts into actively educating their students. Along with being educators, they are also pursuing their own careers and interests in humanities.

These professors had their love of humanities and arts originate in their youth and young adult years. Tisa Zito, digital film producer and program director for [DOCUTAH](#), had an obsession

with documenting.

She started taking photos with a camera early in life, and she even has books of photos showing her life in chronological order. She was always making films with a video camera and getting the other children in her neighborhood, and her siblings, to create a film.

Professor of English, Dr. Stephen Armstrong, had a love for film and music. He recalls the first movie he ever saw at a drive-in theater was “Herbie Goes to Monte Carlo,” and the second was “Young Frankenstein” that he saw with his dad.

“Music and movies, [I] wouldn't say they saved me, but they gave me a much happier life when I was in high school,” Stephen said. “And coupled with books, novels and plays and some poetry, [they] gave me a better life. So I've just been cultivating it.”

John Terry, assistant professor of theater arts, said his fascination for theater started when he was about 22 years old, when his friend brought him to an audition at their local community college theater. John then went to university for acting.

Ami recollected always reading as a child, and so literature naturally became part of her world.

She said, “I think since I was a kid, [I] sort of lived my life through stories,” she said.

“Sometimes the stories seem[ed] more real than what was real.”

These passions for documenting, filming, writing, performing and reading led these professors to

sharing their passions with their students through teaching, and eventually led them to educating at Utah Tech.

“I just kept following with tenacity and work ethic in all aspects of my life; jobs I took, hobbies,” Tisa said. “I kept writing and cranking out short films on my own. In the beginning they didn't always pay well, but as the work got better and my experience grew, that changed and eventually it led me to great experiences including this position at Utah Tech.”

As film producer at Utah Tech, Tisa teaches multiple film classes that reflect her adoration for the art of filmmaking. She gives feedback to help her students sculpt their film craft and she even stars in them as well.

“When we sit down and critique a script, I make sure that the human element is coming through, that we’re not just caught up in the space or the special effects or the flash,” she said.

This focus on the human element is what makes humanities personal and unique, yet the field faces negative narratives. Part of these negative narratives is the conception that these graduates later regret their major or are often unemployed.

However, Ami emphasized that the unemployment rate isn’t any higher than business majors, and that humanities majors report [high satisfaction](#) in life, despite the [articles](#) about most regretted majors.

John also explained that with careers pertaining to theater and going to college for theater, not everybody is going to be an A-list movie star and make an enormous amount of money.

“But I really believe that, especially those people that double major or minor in theater, they just become a more well-rounded human being... and that shows their capacity for learning new skills when they go on to the job market,” John said.

For students who want to become actors, he said university is a much better route than taking workshops because with college, students can show employers that they had the fortitude to stick it out for four years. It shows that students can take on tasks and complete goals, proving they are assets.

While STEM field graduates are the future doctors, scientists and engineers of the world, humanities graduates [develop](#) equally vital skills like effective communication, critical thinking, culture competency and empathy, ethical decision making and versatility.

These values give graduates a deeper understanding of human cultures and enable diverse worldviews, which are of [invaluable](#) worth in a world that is becoming heavily STEM focused.

At Utah Tech, these humanities professors have even had their own successes pertaining to their respective fields, further showcasing the impact of their expertise.

An example of this is Stephen, who by training and education is a literary scholar in creative

writing; but he's also a film director, music and film writer. He has published [multiple books](#) about film directors and directed his own [short film](#).

In fact, Stephen became a film writer by way of music. He had been working on short stories during his doctorate degree, and one specific story that he had been working on for about three months was rejected. Then, moving on, he wrote a feature story about the use of music in film noir; it became the cover story.

“I was on Sunset Boulevard right near the House of Blues,” he said. “And if you've been in LA and these news stands still, it's not like they used to, but they have these wonderful kind of alleys that you walk in. And there's the magazine I wrote for, and there's my story on the cover. And I said, ‘Well, I guess that's really a sign right there.’”

Additionally, Ami has contributed to humanities through her involvement with [Utah Humanities](#), an organization that delivers programming throughout the state through financial means, marketing and educational support. She was on the board for six years and served as chair of the board of directors.

“They’re having programming in those places that, you know, what my grandma called ‘wide spots in the road,’ by those little towns that are just really, really small and sometimes get missed,” she said.

This outreach is crucial, especially because of the negative narratives floating around concerning

humanities. Ami said it's important to look at the real numbers and remind students that a false narrative is being spread. Educating both students and educators, like high school counselors, can help fight against those negative narratives.

“I think we just have to do a better job of getting that story out and finding those places to talk about that,” Ami said. “I think we've been playing in retreat for a while, and so we're just trying to kind of keep our footing... to really start pushing actively back against the negative narratives.”