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How the Applied Humanities is Transforming Humanities Education in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the rise of the Applied Humanities programs in American Higher Education is transforming how the humanities is taught in the United States, shifting it from a traditionally theoretical orientation toward more career-relevant, interdisciplinary, and socially engaged models. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative analysis of program data from over 50 U.S. institutions with qualitative content analysis of curriculum frameworks, mission statements, and institutional marketing materials. Findings reveal a significant increase in new programs launched since 2015 under labels such as Public Humanities, Digital Humanities, Health Humanities, and Environmental Humanities. Enrollment patterns show that these programs are especially successful at attracting non-traditional students, particularly those pursuing online and hybrid degrees. The analysis demonstrates that these programs embed transferable skills common to the humanities—communication, ethics, cultural competency, and systems thinking—within real-world contexts like healthcare, public policy, and technology. Through case studies of five universities, the paper illustrates how these programs maintain core disciplinary strengths in interpretation and critical inquiry while aligning with workforce demands and community engagement. Furthermore, faculty interviews and student surveys highlight a growing interest in project-based learning, internships, and collaborative research. The paper concludes that the Applied Humanities represents not a dilution but an evolution of the humanities, enabling institutions to reframe liberal arts education as essential to addressing complex societal challenges. This transformation is reshaping both the identity and value proposition of the humanities in higher education, with long-term implications for curriculum design, faculty roles, and public perception of the field.

Keywords: Applied Humanities, Humanities Education, U.S. Higher Education, Liberal Arts, Curriculum Innovation