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# Humanities Decline in Darkness: How Humanities Research Funding Works

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## Abstract

Humanities research is underfunded, and the institutional sources and intellectual effects of this underfunding are insufficiently appreciated. The paper gives an example of the negative effects of a humanities discipline's lack of research infrastructure on scholarly work. Section 2 describes the main categories through which research funds arrive on U.S. campuses. Section 3 describes the disproportions between Science & Engineering (S&E or “STEM”) funding and funding for social and cultural disciplines. Section 4 discusses the “institutional funds” that universities use to cover research costs from their own pockets. Section 5 shows that universities do not use their institutional funds to compensate for inequities in humanities funding but to perpetuate them. Section 6 claims that the current state of humanities funding abridges academic freedom and calls on humanities administrative personnel to lead a national campaign to rectify the current situation. Misconceptions about humanities research and its funding must be openly acknowledged and addressed so that it can come to have public effects that reflect its actual intellectual achievements.

**Keywords:** academic research; federal funding; higher education; humanities; humanities research; research funding

Humanities research is underfunded—when it is not unfunded. Funding's skewed and inadequate presence in the humanities disciplines shrinks scholarship, weakens interdisciplinary collaborations with neighboring fields, and curtails the public benefits of humanities work. It drives away undergraduate majors and undermines tenure-track jobs. Humanities scholarship needs a near-term increase in funding by at least an order of magnitude, and we should be planning and launching a campaign for that—but But to do that we need to be clear about how humanities research funding works.

## 1. Some Costs of Non-Support

I first began to think about research funding while noticing that it was taking me forever to turn my dissertation into a book.

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One obvious reason for the delay was my actual job. I was lucky enough to have gotten a tenure-track position at a research university that involved teaching two courses per term, which probably took 30 hours most weeks in session, plus the usual committee service, which was only a few hours a week, which left time for research—on the understanding that the basic professor job starts at around 55 hours a week and goes up from there. I tried to avoid teaching summer school to keep 12-week summers to work full-time on research after collapsing for a week or two after spring term. I organized panels at conferences and edited a couple of books on the side of my “tenure book,” which counted for promotion as “professional activities.” I did get in a couple of hours most days on my scholarship and writing. And yet the revisions were dragging on endlessly—literally for 8 years from the filing of the dissertation to the appearance of the book.

The other reason for the time this took was my change of focus. My dissertation was about Ralph Waldo Emerson’s theory of individual subjectivity. I developed a critique of individualism using literary theory, the intellectual history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant theology, political thought, and New England’s views on gender and race. I would argue that Emerson’s apparent individualism (“self-reliance”) was self-contradictory and that over the course of his career, he devised several successful resolutions that all required collective politics.

The book version of this work kept the basic paradigm of Emerson as a secret non-individualist but described him—less positively—as the originator of corporate subjectivity, a kind of middle-class consciousness that would allow people to work in the large organizations that would be dominating American capitalism after the Civil War. Emerson went from theorizing a “non-autonomous subject” (the dissertation) to inventing “submissive individualism” (the book).<sup>1</sup>

Great, you might think, he spent 8 years changing some terms. However, what had happened behind the terms was the embedding of the literary theory I would learn as a doctoral student into 19th-century social structure and political economy. In the shift from dissertation to book, Emerson had gone from a rather repressed, indirect critic of the liberal individualism with which he is normally associated (the dissertation) to an architect of the divided consciousness that would allow the white middle class to operate corporations—and also subordinate professional knowledge to them (the book).

To make this shift, I had to study. I read economic history, legal history, the history of American psychology, political theory, and management theory, including organizational psychology, 19th-century U.S. psychological theory, and the history of slavery, antislavery, and abolitionism. Some of this had been part of my grad curriculum, as expanded by reading groups with friends (Marx, postcolonial theory, Wittgenstein), but most were not. Much of those eight years were a sustained reading scramble, with the help of a couple of excellent doctoral students who worked as research assistants. There was no Emerson Lab, or Center for the Study of U.S. Political Economy, Gender and Race with funded full-time support and research staff. So the interdisciplinary “lit review” took not many months but many years.

I learned this way that solo scholarly efforts take time—way too much of it. I had a few thousand dollars in many years to hire a grad for two afternoons a week, mostly to screen papers and primary texts and, in some cases, to write summaries for me. They were literary critics like me, so we were all in the same position of learning a subfield like 19th-century

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<sup>1</sup> Newfield 1996.

U.S. economics by the seat of our pants. Their time was limited—they were also teaching and grading 50 students per term while doing their own research. I then had the job of assembling interdisciplinary materials into a coherent whole. Working with people already trained in adjacent fields—coordinating a collaboration—was out of the question. I sometimes felt stupid for making such a big deal out of everything; why didn't I just “publish my dissertation?”

I came to feel that I was not only studying the 19<sup>th</sup> century but also living in it. Academic literary study was and is still organized as a practice of gentlemen-amateurs. The exceptions—computational humanities in some cases—prove the persistence of the rule. I felt fortunate rather than resentful, as I was well aware of the downslope of material conditions my friends and colleagues were facing. I taught at a public research university with a low teaching load (2–2-1 on the quarter system) and enough money to get 5–8 hours per week of help during term time (for which I spent not too long applying each year). The vast majority of literary scholars teach 3–5 courses per term, which eliminates their research time; they have no research funds at all. Many also work multiple jobs and teach or do other paid work during summers when I was able to work on my book. Even in a privileged position, my revisions took forever.

I worked on other projects as well, like racism in the wars on “political correctness” that were starting to ruin academia's reputation with much of the public. But these had to wait on the Emerson work. I also learned how hard it was to respond to immediate public issues under the working conditions that humanities scholars took for granted.

Neither the wealthy private universities where I studied nor the middle-class public research university where I worked are representative of the profession of literary studies. Most instructors lack tenured status, not to mention research expectations, funding, and appropriate teaching schedules. The Modern Language Association's former data analyst, David Laurence, found that in “more than 50%, or 2,188 institutions, deep in the universe of the United States degree-granting colleges and universities, one has yet to encounter a single tenured or tenure-track faculty member.”<sup>2</sup>

We cannot get a much better breakdown than this as we lack national data on teaching and research obligations by university type, discipline, and so on. But to do some guesswork, if the 50 most active doctorate-granting departments in literature and languages average 30 tenure-track faculty, and not many more than that have the equivalent of 2–2 teaching expectations and complementary funds, then around 1500 U.S. professors have the working conditions I just described. However, there are around 80,000 college-level instructors in these fields in the United States. These are the research conditions of the 2%, and these conditions are already inadequate.

The gap between the 2% and the rest is rarely described, much less addressed.<sup>3</sup> Since cultural knowledge should be fully inclusive, and since all trained scholars should be able to conduct

<sup>2</sup> Laurence 2019, 8.

<sup>3</sup> A notable exception appears in Andrews's Acknowledgements that preface *The Academic Avant-Garde* (Andrews 2023). After describing her excellent working life as a doctoral student at Yale University, she wrote, “I left Yale with a tenure-track job in hand at a small, underfunded liberal arts college in rural Maryland. The next four years were thus spent in conditions quite different from those under which the book was conceived. At Washington College, I taught more classes than the average faculty member does at a research-intensive institution, and I advised no graduate students and had no research assistance. There were no colloquia and no scholarly speaking series. There

scholarship, the research conditions for the study of literature and language are a national embarrassment. They shortchange the field, its social benefits, and knowledge itself.

## 2. Funding Categories

“Amateur” is a relative term. In universities, it is relative to the research apparatus that was formalized during the Cold War for fields related directly to military or economic power and later, to biosciences. This apparatus defines professional standards and public expectations about what valid knowledge looks like, which institutions create it, and how quickly it is put into general use. Disciplines that do not generate knowledge with the same speed, formality, and public recognition—because they do not directly and obviously support U.S. military or economic pre-eminence, or because their effects are mostly “non-pecuniary” or non-monetary—are by definition amateur fields, and to some are not fields at all.

I have been fighting this view in my research for a couple of decades now, and I raise it not because I think the humanities fields are doomed to marginality—quite the contrary—but because it is the framework humanities disciplines need to overcome, even or especially when administrators and others are too polite to say so. I am not arguing that the humanities should adopt scientific norms, but that they should have the financial means to complement, contest, or rival science in explaining people, societies, and cultures. To do this properly today, they need a step-function increase in funding.

Research funding can be divided into two main types—external (“extramural”) and internal (“institutional”). The former comes from research funding agencies like the National Science Foundation. All the main ones are funded by the federal government. There are a lot of these, and Congress keeps a list of those it puts in the category of research agency.<sup>4</sup> Extramural research funding also comes from states, in smaller amounts. And it comes from for-profit corporations (Intel, Exxon Mobil, Novartis) and not-for-profit foundations (Mellon, Ford, Gates). Philanthropy also funds research, particularly in biomedicine. We can simplify and say that extramural funds come from these five main sources (federal and state governments, foundations, corporations, and gifts). Overall, the federal government funds the great majority of academic research, while the corporate share remains well under 10 percent of the total.<sup>5</sup>

Extramural funds are not a major source of funding for humanities research. A small minority of faculty in humanities departments will have an outside grant at any given time, and the amounts attached to these grants, generally below \$100,000 per year, are much smaller than grants in science and engineering fields.

Colleges and universities also spend their own internal funds to support research. Some senior administrators have funds held by their offices to spend on research at their discretion. This group generally includes the president, the provost, the vice president for research, and the deans (of physical sciences, social sciences, humanities, business, and so on). Funds may also be held by departments for the research of some or all of their members.

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were about one-twentieth the number of library books, and database access was limited. As the institution’s enrollment numbers worsened and its structural deficit ballooned, faculty members were regularly threatened with termination, and our pay and benefits were cut. This book was rewritten under these circumstances.” (viii)

<sup>4</sup> Harris et al. 2023.

<sup>5</sup> National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2022, Table 1: Higher education R&D expenditures, by source of funds: FYs 1953–2022.

A small percentage of individual faculty may have research funds attached to endowed chairs. Or they may have special access to departmental, divisional, or university resources like physical space for equipment and collaboration. Gifts are given to departments as well as to divisions, schools, or universities. They can be modest but also important. I have been told by a half-dozen department chairs at public flagship universities that these departmental endowments saved core activities during the downturn after the financial crisis.

The scarcity of research resources makes these resources rivalrous. Limited funds are more likely to cause rivalry than collaboration, which defeats one of their main purposes. Scarcity also encourages administrators and faculty alike to conceal resource data, for fear of stirring resentment. This helps lock in academic omertà about research costs and flows.

This policy of withheld data may dampen potential conflict, but the cost is to blind nearly everyone to the reality of their working conditions. This in turn has the effect of keeping people from addressing them in an informed way or even knowing where to start.

I am generalizing here because there are no public rules about where research money is held, who decides how it is spent, or who receives it. Funding practice varies from college to college and can change at any one college when the dean or provost changes, as it usually does.

Still, we can identify three regularities: gift funds follow donors' wishes, administrators allot funds according to their discretion, and fund flows are shrouded in blanket institutional secrecy, especially at the departmental and individual levels.

The first two are linked: the discretion of individual donors and administrators constitutes funding policy. The third principle enables this—and makes policy discussion very difficult. The humanities predicament flows less from any feature of humanities research than from the absence of meaningful funding policy debate. The missing debate follows in large part from the systematic concealment of data.

### 3. Federal (Non) Funding of the Humanities

Let us look at external and internal funding in turn.

To do this, we need to look at some numbers. For starters, the United States is the biggest spender on research and development (R&D) in the world (with China now a close 2<sup>nd</sup>). Most of this is “experimental development” (67%) and applied research (18%), meaning that only 15% of R&D in the U.S. overall is spent on basic research. While 75 percent of overall R&D is performed by businesses, the federal government is the biggest performer of *basic* research (46 percent in 2021).<sup>6</sup>

This means that disciplines with little or no commercial potential are likely to get nearly all of their funding from government rather than business. Business looks for financial return on investment, not to make a contribution to human knowledge. Essentially all humanities scholarship is basic research, in part because it is almost always a non-commercial or non-pecuniary category.

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<sup>6</sup> National Science Board, National Science Foundation 2024.

Given this non-commercial status of nearly all humanities scholarship, the amount governments spend on it is of burning interest. Of the \$54 billion or so in research that the federal government funds in U.S. higher education, \$69 million goes to the humanities. That is, the humanities receive 0.13% of the federal total. For every thousand dollars the feds spend on research, the humanities receive a dollar and 30 cents. This is a tiny slice of the overall federal research pie.

If you have looked at the budget for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), you will notice that this \$69 million is less than the NEH's overall FY2023 budget of \$207 million. That is because the NEH spends only a fraction of its funding on research—about \$37 million that year by my calculation. The federal government appears not to consider the NEH a research funding agency, likely because it spends less than \$100 million per year on research. The Congressional Research Service's report on Federal R&D identifies budgets for 14 research agencies at the federal level, and yet NEH and NEA are not among them.<sup>7</sup>

This means that a large amount of valuable humanities research goes unfunded by outside agencies. For example, in 2017, I was lucky enough to get an NEH Collaborative Research Grant to study the effects of quantification on the humanities in higher education.<sup>8</sup> This is arguably the NEH program that most resembles the research that is routine in science and engineering. But there were a total of nine collaborative awards that year. In a country that has over 166,000 humanities instructors in tertiary education, this total of nine awards is absurd. Most worthy research in the humanities goes unfunded. Or rather, it is not funded extramurally but self-funded.

However, the federal government is not the only source of research funding. The humanities may receive research support through foundations and individual gifts, as well as state governments and other not-for-profit entities. It is hard to tell how much of this other funding goes to scholarship as opposed to public engagement and other humanities-related activities.<sup>9</sup> I am going to assume that most—my hunch is nearly all—work we would call humanities *scholarship* or *research* takes place in academic institutions.

Much of the cost of research at universities is funded by universities. Of the nearly \$100 billion that universities spent on research in FY2022, \$54 billion came from the federal government. But another \$25 billion came from the universities themselves (called “institutional funds” by the Higher Education R&D Survey—or HERD survey—that the NSF must conduct by law).<sup>10</sup> This means that more than 25 cents of every research dollar spent at universities comes out of the universities' own pockets, a point to which I will return.

One common belief about academic research is that Science and Engineering Fields (S&E, also known more widely as STEM) earn extramural funds, and thus make money for the university by getting these grants. The university's own research money, in this view, is given to disciplines that for whatever reason cannot get extramural grants, which is too

<sup>7</sup> Harris et al. 2023.

<sup>8</sup> National Endowment for the Humanities, Award Search [n.d.](#)

<sup>9</sup> The Humanities Indicators project has gathered funding data, but does not distinguish between funding for scholarship or research on the one hand and various kinds of activities, dissemination, and public engagement on the other; see American Academy of Arts & Sciences. [n.d.-a.](#)

<sup>10</sup> National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2022, Table 1: Higher education R&D expenditures, by source of funds: FYs 1953–2022.

often the case for the humanities, arts, and most non-quantitative social sciences, law, and other analytical fields. According to this common belief, universities can compensate humanities scholars for the near absence of governmental support.

This common theory is wrong. However, we need to cover some additional ground to understand why.

#### 4. The Student Subsidy for Research

Where do “institutional funds” come from? They have several main sources. Private universities with large endowments can use some endowment returns. A second source is student tuition. Tuition is generally a more important source of institutional funds (for research and other purposes) than endowment returns in the sector as a whole since most private colleges or universities have modest endowments.

Public universities, on the other hand, can use state funding as well as student tuition. State funding is generally tied to student enrollments, so public funds as well as tuition are tied to students and their instruction. A public university’s core operations are overwhelmingly funded by these two student-based revenue streams at public universities.

You may have heard small numbers attached to the state share of funding—“We have gone from state-supported to a state-located,” a budget officer will say, and then throw out a number like 11% as the public contribution to the campus budget. Do not take these statements at face value. They are comparing state revenues to total revenues that include non-educational activities—clinical revenues from medical schools, student accommodation, and the like. Core *educational* activities remain very dependent on state funds, even at public research universities with large grant income.

To get a sense of the proportions here, I will use the case I know best, the University of California. In 2023–24, its “core funds”—spent on campus educational activities—were only 22% of total revenues, while 38% came from medical centers, 23% came from “Sales and Services,” and 6% came from “Private Support.”<sup>11</sup>

Of that campus core, more than four-fifths of the funding derived from the combination of student tuition and state allocations (44% of core funding was from the state, not 11% or other small percentage). In short, at public universities, institutional funds for research depend heavily on student-based revenues.

When we talk about college, wealthy private research universities often spring to mind—Harvard, Stanford, Cornell, and the like. These universities are not typical, and their least typical feature is that they can fund a good share of research internally from endowment or investment income. The normal situation at private colleges or universities is that they use their endowments to cover the gap between what high-quality undergraduate teaching costs and what undergraduates can actually pay. At these places, most institutional funds come from net student tuition. I am certain that undergraduate learning benefits from research-active instructors, and that is a good thing because undergraduates are subsidizing that research with their tuition.

<sup>11</sup> Finance and Capital Strategies Committee, Item F12 2023.



The extent that research is subsidized by student tuition should be part of policy debate. The second Trump administration is likely to force the debate about research costs. It would be much better to have informed pro-humanities people speaking forcefully in these debates. The current secrecy policy hamstrings humanities advocacy.

In short, money from these three main sources—gifts and endowment returns, tuition, and state funds, the latter two much larger than the former—is bundled by the upper administration and then sent through (invisible) channels to particular deans and departments in greatly varying amounts.

## 5. The One Percent Rule for the Humanities Share

What happens to humanities research funding when we switch from federal spending to higher education spending from all sources?

According to the HERD survey, it increases by a factor of ten. Higher education spent \$713,685,000 on humanities R&D across the 547 surveyed institutions.<sup>12</sup> Nine-tenths of humanities spending is non-federal, coming from private foundations, state governments, and the university itself (from gifts, tuition, and state funds).

In aggregate, how much of this money comes from which sources? We do not know. In aggregate, what is the money spent on? We do not know. The HERD data are compiled from at least 547 separate institutional reports, and I know anecdotally of variation in reporting even within the same university system. This opacity is a well-known problem that has never been seriously addressed.

This total amount is to cover all research costs, direct and indirect. Direct costs mean researcher salaries, support staff costs, equipment, facilities charges, energy, and the other people and things that are used on the specific project funded by the grant. Indirect costs refer to facilities and administration, broadly speaking, that are used by a number of projects in a department or division: the financial officers that manage all the grants in the biochemistry department, the costs of refurbishing laboratory buildings and constructing new ones, and so on. While STEM facilities and equipment are massively more expensive to build and operate than those in non-STEM, staff costs are comparable—were humanities collaborations ever endowed with staff.

The HERD survey lists humanities R&D spending alongside other fields it classifies as non-Science & Engineering funding.<sup>13</sup> The humanities receive 12.2% of the non-S&E total expenditures (the total is \$5.86 billion).<sup>14</sup> This is much better than zero, this \$714 million nationwide, even if it is a small fraction of the nearly \$100 billion in university R&D expenditures overall (of which \$54 billion is federal).

<sup>12</sup> National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2022, Table 58: Higher education R&D expenditures in non-science and engineering fields, ranked by all FY 2022 non-S&E fields: FYs 2020–22 and by subfield for FY 2022.

<sup>13</sup> The other categories are Business management and business administration, Communication and communication technologies, Education, Law, Social work, Visual and performing arts, and Other.

<sup>14</sup> Non S&E is about 6% of the total of higher education R&D expenditures in 2022 (\$97.84 billion), from National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2022, Table 1: Higher education R&D expenditures, by source of funds: FYs 1953–2022.



One way to remember this is in round numbers: universities spend \$100 billion on research (from all sources). One-tenth of that goes to all non-STEM fields as a group, social sciences included. And then one-tenth of these non-STEM funds go to humanities disciplines. There's a tacit One Percent Rule for the humanities—with the one percent as a ceiling, not a floor.

Behind these aggregate figures lies enormous variation. For example, at the top of the scale, the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor spent \$25.3 million on humanities research in 2022. UC Berkeley, a major research university in the humanities, spent \$4.4 million that year, or a little more than 1/6<sup>th</sup> of Michigan (putting it in 51<sup>st</sup> place). Only 11 universities spent \$10 million or more on the humanities in 2022.

Spending \$2 million that year put a university in the top 100. My former institution, UC Santa Barbara, spending \$1.7 million on humanities research, was ranked 108<sup>th</sup>. My first tenure-track job was at Rice University, a wealthy private institution: it spent \$1.3 million on the humanities (placing 131<sup>st</sup>). After institutions 140 and 141 (the University of Oregon and the University of Connecticut), universities spent less than \$1 million per year.

Somewhat incredibly, the University of Chicago is in this category (at \$882,000 per year for 149<sup>th</sup> place). So is Stanford University, reporting \$307,000 spent on humanities research in 2022, for a 222<sup>nd</sup> place finish. Such data do make one wonder about institutional priorities and also, more technically, about variations in HERD reporting from campus to campus. However, let us forge ahead.

Two charts with selected institutions will clarify a couple of overall points (Figure 1).<sup>15</sup>

There are a few things to notice. First, apparently similar research universities (like Berkeley and Michigan, or Princeton and Stanford) have widely divergent levels of expenditure.<sup>17</sup> (Medical centers explain much but by no means all of this variance.) Second, they spend enormous amounts of their own money supporting research—\$210 million in 2022 at Berkeley, \$169 million at Stanford, and an incredible \$612 million of institutional funds at Michigan. More than a third of Michigan's research funding is out of pocket.

Given these large amounts of internal spending on research and the high-dollar extramural funding of STEM fields, one might revert to the common belief I mentioned above that there'd be plenty of money for non-STEM fields. How do non-STEM fields and the humanities fare? Here are the same institutions again (Figure 2).

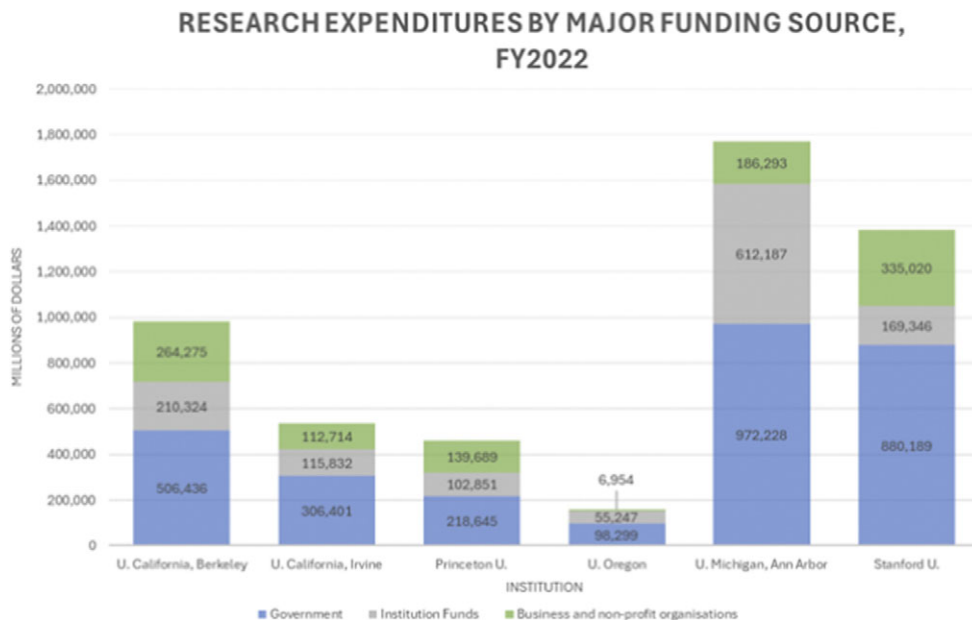
You will notice that the right-hand bar for each institution is much taller than the left-hand bar. This leads to our third observation: universities spend much more of their own funds on research, STEM and non-STEM together, than they spend on non-STEM from all sources. Institutional funds are used mainly to support STEM research.

<sup>15</sup> National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2022, Table 58: Higher education R&D expenditures in non-science and engineering fields, ranked by all FY 2022 non-S&E fields; FYs 2020–22 and by subfield for FY 2022; and Table 28: Higher education R&D expenditures funded by institutional funds, ranked by all R&D expenditures, by R&D field: FY 2022.

<sup>16</sup> National Endowment for the Humanities 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Michigan and Stanford's are boosted by medical centers and the massive scale of federal biomedical funding. This is the case across the country, though less so at UC Irvine.

<sup>18</sup> National Endowment for the Humanities 2023.



**Figure 1.** Blue is federal and state governments combined, and green bundles non-governmental sources together (foundations with corporations among others). Gray indicates the university's own institutional funds that they spend on research.<sup>16</sup>

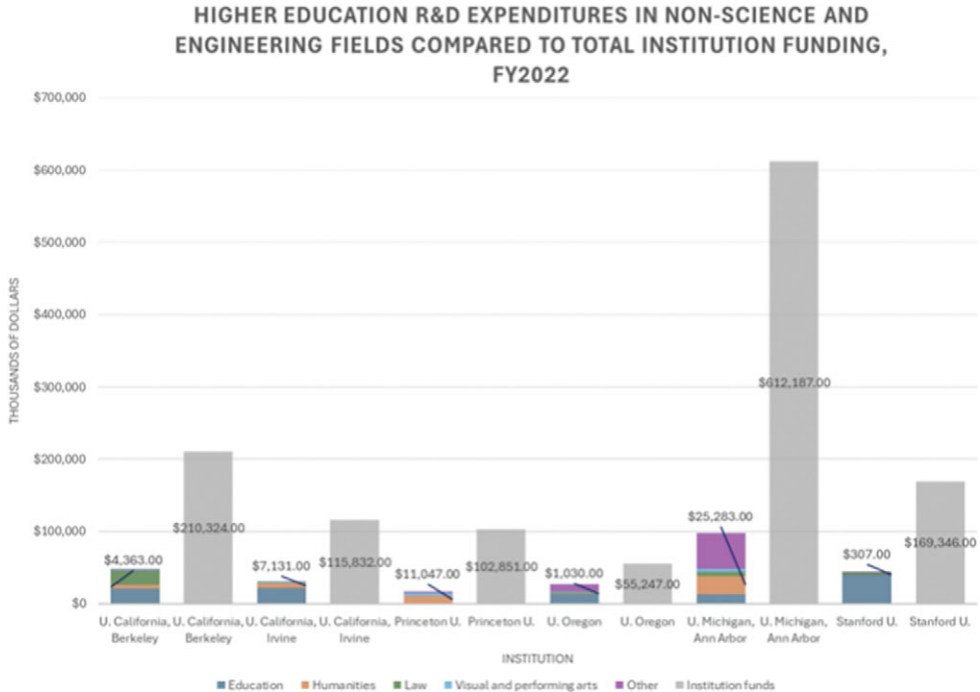
Source: Author's calculations.

This is a deeper point than it might seem and leads to a fourth observation. Universities spend (much) more of their institutional funds supporting research that, almost always, already has extramural funding than universities spend on research that almost always lacks extramural funding. Humanities fields are not supported by the university when the government neglects them, but further neglected by it.

To invoke again the common belief that STEM research earns outside grants, allowing universities to spend their internal research funds on non-STEM research that cannot get outside grants: this belief is wrong. Universities spend most of their internal research funds adding to the extramural funds that STEM grants have already received.

Is there a reason beyond epistemic bias against the humanities that induces universities to disadvantage them? Yes: extramural research grants *lose* money for the universities that host them and they have to make up the difference. Extramural sponsors do not cover the full cost of the research—deliberately so. The federal government offers the best coverage of indirect costs, and corporations and foundations the worst. Sometimes the latter will pay zero overheads as a matter of policy, forcing universities to subsidize the research they fund. This forces the university to come up with the missing money, money to pay for facilities, support staff, and dozens of other essential ingredients that are not fully covered by the sponsor.

As we have seen, most of the subsidy revenues, the “institutional funds,” come from students—either state allocations or their tuition fees. Much of the cost of STEM research is cross-



**Figure 2.** Gray bars are overall institutional spending, moved from the gray band in the previous figure. The shorter bars to the left are non-S&E funding. (Note that this non-S&E funding comes from all sources, most of it likely institutional funds but much not, so these shorter bars include Mellon grants, Gates grants, Spencer grants, grants from the Social Science Research Council, NEH and NEA grants, and the like.)<sup>18</sup>

Source: Author's calculations.

subsidized by revenues from instruction, and much or most of that (depending on the institution) comes from non-STEM fields.<sup>19</sup>

Since a good share of institutional funds is earned by instruction in non-STEM fields, they have a claim to receive a solid share of those funds for non-STEM research. As I noted above, you can get some sense of how they are doing by comparing the bars in Figure 2: they are receiving a fractional return. Were the non-STEM (left-hand) bar reduced to reflect institutional funds only, so that it is strictly comparable to the right-hand bar, the gap would be greater still.

The orange bands denote the humanities. There's the best case of Michigan and decent showings from Princeton and Irvine. On the other hand, the University of Oregon, with its excellent humanities center and affiliated scholars, spends 1/55<sup>th</sup> on the humanities compared to its institutional funds. The humanities share of *all institutional* expenditures at these universities are as follows: UC Berkeley 1.9%; UC Irvine 6.1%; Princeton 10.6%, the University of Oregon 0.2, the University of Michigan 4%, and Stanford, matching the feds in a race to the bottom, 0.2%.

The University of California as a system spent 0.5% of its total research expenditures on the arts and humanities together in 2018–19; they were allocating about \$26.6 million to those

<sup>19</sup> For a sustained explanation see Newfield 2016, Stage 2.

fields out of \$49.4 billion that year.<sup>20</sup> After that year, UC simply stopped reporting arts and humanities funding as a distinct category. They vanish from the charts in the report.

A fifth point, then, is that humanities fields are underfunded in proportion both to other fields and in proportion to their contribution to the revenues that make up institutional funds.<sup>21</sup> Universities spend an enormous amount of their own money on research, and the humanities disciplines may at long last decide their work requires an equitable share of it.

## 6. Budgetary Grounds of Epistemic Justice

How humanities funding works has hinged on how the humanities are managed. The word that comes to mind is “secretly.” University administrators treat funding flows not as institutional features to be analyzed through shared governance but as proprietary data to be withheld. The withholding prevents informed advising, deliberation, or consent. The result is that funding shortfalls are something that faculty and students can complain about but not really understand or correct.

The Modern Language Association broached this problem in 2016. Their “Statement on Resource Allocation and Academic Freedom” first acknowledges traditional violations of academic freedom: “If teachers can be threatened with loss of employment because their research or teaching does not conform to private funding interests or because they publish or teach unpopular ideas, inquiry is not free.” It then states the following:

Inquiry may be restricted through means that do not involve threats to employment. Funds supporting effective teaching or research may be reduced or withheld not on intellectual or professional grounds, but solely on financial grounds. These restrictions are particularly worrisome when they are not disclosed or discussed with faculty bodies through processes of shared governance. Under some circumstances, financial calculations may constitute discrimination against individuals, subdisciplines, or disciplines as a whole. If the calculations and their rationales are not shared with appropriate faculty members, the faculty cannot determine whether academic freedom has been affected or participates in the adjudication of conflicting claims.<sup>22</sup>

It is indeed true that “financial calculations may constitute discrimination against individuals, subdisciplines, or disciplines as a whole.” In practice, withheld calculations lead to discrimination against sociocultural knowledge by systematically underfunding it, with no overt rationale. Faculty members may retain the abstract conception of academic freedom, like their right to study anti-capitalist economic ideas in 19th-century New England. However, this abstract right does not assure concrete academic freedom, defined as having the *means* to pursue this or some other topic of the faculty member’s choice. Outside of special cases like endowed chairs, the means are in the hands of administrators and do not emerge from a collaborative process based on analyses of available data in which the scholars affected by the results are able to participate.

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<sup>20</sup> University of California: Accountability Report 2020.

<sup>21</sup> I have not demonstrated this second point here. See Newfield 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Modern Language Association 2017.

As a result, even tenured faculty members generally lack the means to pursue equitable funding or to make equitable funding a coherent and systematic, as opposed to episodic and reactive, institutional issue. Budgeting remains beyond policy and politics. Efforts to democratize the university need to include research funding, whose current structure causes both epistemic injustice in research and learned helplessness among faculty members. Unsurprisingly, few tenured faculty have made the effort to grasp research funding with a clarity that would allow them to speak out.<sup>23</sup>

The effort, even if undertaken, is often blocked. The state of fiscal secrecy puts the entire burden of campaigning for funding justice—or basic funding transparency—squarely on the shoulders of those who do know, and should, and could: humanities administrators. These are deans, provosts, humanities center directors, some departmental chairs, as well as the directors and presidents of national associations and foundations like the MLA, the Mellon Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the National Humanities Alliance (NHA), the National Humanities Center, and so on.

These entities must now campaign to construct the research infrastructure that humanities scholarship needs and deserves. The basic steps are easy to describe. They start with duplicating what the NSF has long been required by federal statute to do for S&E fields: gather data through national surveys; publish the data; analyze that data; publish commentaries on the data; generate discourse and debate about what the data means for intellectual life in the humanities, for the research results of the discipline, and for the public knowledge that issues from humanities research.

The failure of administrators to speak out is itself a message: it tells the world that the humanities fields do not have funding problems, so if their output is weak it's because their thinking is weak. In the absence of positive knowledge about desperate material needs, the public discussion defaults to “not enough majors” and “too many PhDs.” This erases the causal link between (comparatively) low research levels and low public visibility plus low public esteem, though this causal link appears in interviews and other empirical work.<sup>24</sup> In the resulting vacuum of material information, the interested public, with the encouragement of many scholars, also gets distracted by “theory wars,” alleged internal intellectual flaws, charges of overly liberal politics, and anything else that can be used to blame the fiscal victims.

Most of the humanities deans and other officials I've known say that any discussion of funding shortfalls will “backfire.” They take on the role of first suppressors. The claim is that unless we are neither seen nor heard, we will be zeroed out. All such officials I have known are sincere, dedicated, intelligent people. And on this issue, they are wrong. Unless they reverse their own omertà, they will continue to make things worse.

In trying to regularize data collection, analysis, reporting, and related functions, we need to be aware that campus officials often have their hands tied by their own bosses. Academia is now generally operated with a corporate chain of command, where a dean who calls for *glasnost*—or enacts it on their own—is courting marginalization, budget reductions, or firing. Administrative service generally entails a *de facto* loyalty oath to fiscal secrecy. Individual faculty members face a similar risk.

<sup>23</sup> For a rare directness about professorial conformity, see Finlayson 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Heller 2023.

The only internal remedy is a steady, relentless campaign of institutional education about the need in the non-S&E fields for surveys and the rest of the data infrastructure and the open fiscal discussions that would result. This campaign will need to happen for months or years or however long it takes. I know a couple of deans who are trying to do this. So far, they have received little support from their peers. That must change.

Humanities administrators need much more support and encouragement—and pressure—from their faculty, starting with the tenured ranks who are least vulnerable to retaliation. This too will mean a break with the status quo. Over a half-century of accelerating crises—the PhD job market went bad around 1970—tenured humanities faculty have expressed surprisingly little *organized* interest in the material well-being of their fields. This has remained true even as its relative poverty came to hurt the careers of their own students. Reduced resources have often made administrators more defensive, and more likely to treat calls for discussion as pointless attacks. Few faculty are willing to risk possible future support for their individual goals by trying to change the language game in institutions where shunning and exclusion are normal, deniable responses to dissent.

Faculty will need to go beyond expressions of regret for the bad job market and program closures at less fortunate colleges and engage in what Isabelle Bruno calls “statsactivism”—data activism of the kind that has become common in relation to social media, large language models, police violence, and other aspects of the digital world. Without humanities-based statsactivism in relation to working conditions, the national humanities leadership will continue to enable special austerity for its disciplines, accepting calls to make further cuts in doctoral programs, regretting major declines without looking at department workload, and staying silent about the One Percent Rule for research funding.<sup>25</sup> The NEH is currently funded at less than half of its 1980 level in real terms, suggesting that the current strategy is due for a complete revision.<sup>26</sup>

In short, academia needs a cultural change in talking about money, and the change will be coming from below. Graduate student unionization efforts have helped, and tenured faculty need to help as well.

The humanities fields have enormous value exactly as they are. However, if we want them to be on the front line of creating public knowledge that is applied to current struggles, we must rebuild them for that.

<sup>25</sup> On the latter point, humanities associations should stop defining advocacy success as the NEH’s continued existence—rather than as its adequacy to the country’s humanities research needs. It is true that threatening the NEH’s existence is a fun game for idle Republican congresspeople. But that is no reason for the NHA, for example, to proclaim “big wins” in funding when these do not actually exist, or for the MLA to publish it when they do (Klein 2023, 4). The NHA should instead point out that the wonderful lobbying efforts of many humanities scholars managed to increase the NEH’s category “Research Programs” by a bit under \$1.2 million (Lowe and Wolfson 2019, 3). My calculations are that expenditures on research from approximately \$32.6 million in FY 2019 to \$36.8 million in FY2023; this figure combining Research Programs with Digital Humanities and a portion (about 58%) of Preservation and Access. The NEH provides later press releases, e.g., Lowe 2023 “NEH Announces \$35.63 Million for 258 Humanities Projects Nationwide.” The Endowment does not separate research funding from funding for “projects.” Thus my research figure here is both an estimate and an effort to preserve the concept of “basic research” in the humanities. A breakdown of this announcement shows on \$2.25 million of the total tagged for research (“Fellowship Programs at Independent Research Institutions”). For the FY2023 total, see Loane 2023, Table 1. The NEH’s FY2023 Appropriations are online (see National Endowment for the Humanities. n.d.).

<sup>26</sup> American Academy of Arts & Sciences. n.d.-b., Indicator IV-01a: National Endowment for the Humanities Appropriation.

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