

From "Cultural Understanding" to "Business Valuation": Analyzing the "Industrialization" Turn of the Humanities

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Abstract. Contemporary humanities are facing a profound "industrialization" turn, its core characteristic has already quietly slid from "cultural understanding" towards "business valuation." This article argues that this turn is not a scattered reform or a passive compromise, but rather a multi-dimensional systemic project driven by neoliberal "academic capitalism." This article aims to reveal the three major core mechanisms of this turn: First, at the teaching mechanism level, through the reorganization of "Applied Humanities" (such as the University of Arizona model) and "skills discourse" (such as the Georgia Tech "Robin Hood" case), humanistic "content" is instrumentalized into sellable "skills"; Second, at the technical mechanism level, using "Digital Humanities" as an accelerator (such as the "IP-ization" of "Digital Dunhuang"), it provides the technological foundation for industrializing humanistic "raw materials" and realizing "business valuation"; Finally, at the administrative mechanism level, through management tools such as the "impact agenda" (like the UK REF) and "academic portfolio review" (like UNCG hiring rpk Group), the logic of "business valuation" is "liquidated" and "enforced" from the top down. This article's conclusion is that this systemic turn is creating a "Faustian" paradox—the university on one hand sells the "product" of "critical thinking," and on the other hand eliminates its basis for existence in its management—ultimately potentially leading the humanities to slide into a "post-humanities," fragmented, and instrumental existence.

Keywords: Humanities; Industrialization; Neoliberalism; Academic Capitalism; Digital Humanities.

1. Introduction

The Humanities are in the midst of a profound "crisis." However, the common diagnosis of this "crisis"—namely the conflict between "useless" humanistic ideals and the "practical" job market—fundamentally misjudges the nature of the problem. As academic research reveals, this struggle is not about "useful" versus "useless," but rather a profound conflict of value paradigms [1].

On one hand, there is the classical "cultural understanding" paradigm. It originates from the Renaissance "studia humanitatis" [2], its core value lies in "non-instrumentality"—that is, not serving a specific profession, but rather aiming to explore "human experience," cultivate "critical thinking," "empathy," and the moral and cultural sensitivity required for "citizenship" [3].

On the other hand, there is the "business valuation" paradigm driven by contemporary Neoliberalism. This paradigm "rejects 'non-profit' ideals and insists that all value must be measured by the market". Under this logical adjudication, traditional humanities appear "worthless" due to their inherent non-commercial goals, and their only path to survival seems to be a thorough "industrialization" transformation.

This pressure for "business valuation" is no longer an external abstract criticism but has already evolved into systemic "industrialization" mechanisms within the university. This article's core argument is that the "industrialization" turn of the humanities is not a scattered reform, but a multi-dimensional systemic project. It, through the synergistic action of these three major mechanisms—Pedagogical Reorganization (Pedagogy), Technological Acceleration (Technology), and Administrative Liquidation (Administration)—is systematically reshaping the humanities from an exploratory field of "cultural understanding" into an instrumental "product line" for "business valuation."

To demonstrate this point, this article will first sort through the theoretical conflict between the two major value paradigms and the "innovation" discourse trap behind it. Next, this article will

deconstruct the three major "industrialization" mechanisms of teaching, technology, and administration, respectively, and supplement them with real (citable) university cases. Finally, this article will discuss the "critical paradox" triggered by this turn and explore its profound impact leading towards a "post-humanities" [4] state.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Conflict of Values – Citizen (Paideia) vs. Market (Market)

As previously stated, the "cultural understanding" paradigm aims to cultivate "citizens," its core methodology is "critical, speculative, or interpretive". The "business valuation" paradigm, however, aims to produce a "labor force," its core methodology is "measurable, quantifiable, auditable". These two paradigms form a fundamental opposition in the definition of the humanities (as shown in Table 1)

Table 1. Theoretical Framework of Two Paradigms of Value in the Humanities.

| Attribute | Paradigm 1: Cultural Understanding (Citizen/Paideia Model) | Paradigm 2: Commercial Valuation (Industry/Neoliberal Model) |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Source of Value | Intrinsic; derived from human experience | Extrinsic; determined by the market |
| Primary Goal | To cultivate ethics, empathy, critical citizenship | To produce "practical skills" and Return on Investment (ROI) |
| Methodology | Critical, speculative, interpretive | Measurable, quantifiable, auditable ("impact") |
| Pedagogical Focus | Knowledge for knowledge's sake; process | Skills for the market; "savoir-faire" (proprietary skills) |
| Core Metaphor | Polis (City-state/Citizen) | Market (Worker/Product) |

This opposition, in the management practices of the neoliberal university, is skillfully concealed and advanced by a highly deceptive discourse—"Innovation." The analysis of Purdue University's former president Mitch Daniels provides an excellent case. Daniels, hailed as an "ideologue of innovation," his "innovation" initiatives (such as accelerating cooperation with enterprises) occurred simultaneously with "sharp criticism" of the humanities [5].

The word "innovation" here acts as an "ideological Trojan horse." It replaces traditional academic values such as "critique," "understanding," or "knowledge" within the university, becoming the highest virtue. By using this irrefutably positive vocabulary originating from the tech industry, administrators are able to legitimize a pro-business, anti-humanities agenda, packaging it as a future-oriented, progressive initiative. This discursive shift is precisely the embodiment of the "instrumentalization" [6] and "trivialization" [7] of knowledge predicted by Lyotard: the value of knowledge is no longer defined by its "existential self-understanding" but is reduced to "know-how" (savoir-faire) that can serve the "state agenda" [8].

3. The Teaching Mechanism of "Industrialization": Reorganization from "Content" to "Skill"

The first level of the "industrialization" project is to "dismember" and "reorganize" the humanities in terms of Pedagogy.

3.1. "Employability" Discourse: Dissolving "Content" into "Skill"

The most common strategy is to adopt the "Employability" discourse system [9]. Faced with increasing concern from students and families about "Return on Investment" (ROI) [10], universities are forced to redefine the humanities as "skills training." The humanities are claimed to cultivate various "transferable skills" [11], such as "critical thinking".

However, this is a "Faustian bargain." Although supporters argue these skills are merely being "surfaced", the pressure from management is to "tailor relevant academic content to specific market demands". The pinnacle of this instrumentalization is revealed in a case from Georgia Tech: a dean, a medievalist, used 15th-century ballads about Robin Hood to train students how to handle "job interviews" [12].

Here, the specific historical and cultural value of the "content" (Robin Hood ballads) is completely hollowed out; it is reduced to an arbitrary vehicle for delivering "transferable skills" (interview techniques). This is precisely the "trivialization" of knowledge predicted by Lyotard: "industrialization" here manifests as sacrificing specific, contextualized content in exchange for abstract, commodifiable form (i.e., "skill").

3.2. "Applied Humanities": The Structural Surrender

The most explicit structural manifestation of the "industrialization" turn is the emergence of the new degree "Applied Humanities." The University of Arizona is a model of this paradigm, its degree is "essentially half humanities and half pre-professional training", combining humanities with "business" and even "consumer, market, and retail studies" [13].

The result of this transformation is significant: the university reported a 76% increase in its humanities enrollment [14]. However, this success does not stem from an academic revival, but from a meticulously planned "marketing campaign." The university "hired a humanities admissions director and a marketing team" and "trained faculty" to "promise" students jobs.

The essence of "Applied Humanities" is thus laid bare: it is not so much an intellectual movement as it is a marketing strategy. It achieves "industrialization" by reorganizing the humanities department into a business unit equipped with a marketing team. This model completely accepts and internalizes the neoliberal critique (i.e., that traditional humanities are "worthless"), representing the ideological surrender of the "cultural understanding" paradigm to the "business valuation" paradigm.

3.3. The "Embedded" Model: Reduced to a "Service Department"

A more subtle mechanism is to "embed" the humanities into other professional degrees, or to reduce them to highly specialized "niche" fields. The humanities are relegated to a "service department" within the university, functioning akin to an "input factor" for producing engineers or business managers. For example, "corporate history" [15] (as a branding and marketing tool) and "narrative medicine" (using narrative to improve medical practice). Humanities are no longer the destination but have become a component in the "supply chain" of other disciplines.

4. The Technical Mechanism of "Industrialization": "Digital Humanities" as an "IP-ization" Engine

If "Applied Humanities" is the ideological response, then "Digital Humanities" (DH) provides the technological foundation and accelerator for achieving this turn.

In the American academic context, the development of DH stems largely from its "strategic value"; it is "an effective way to signal that students are gaining valuable, practical skills through their humanities study" [16], such as GIS mapping or database management.

In the Chinese context, the connection between DH and "industrialization" is explicit and undisguised. DH is seen as a "new species" in the "digital economy," embarking on a "flourishing path of industrial development," with the goal of "closely integrating academic achievements with market development" [17].

The core mechanism of this "industrialization" is "IP-ization" (IP-ization). "The IP-ization and visualization of humanities and arts has always been an important source of commercial profit for the cultural industry". The case of the Dunhuang Academy is a perfect footnote to this process: by creating 3D reconstructions of the caves, the academy created digital achievements such as the "'Digital Dunhuang' WeChat mini-program".

Here, a key transformation occurs cultural heritage (a public good for "cultural understanding") is converted into a distributable, profitable digital product (a privatized IP for "business valuation").

DH here acts as the engine of "industrialization." It transforms the "raw materials" of the humanities (texts, artworks, historical data) into computable "data," and packages it as "IP" for sale on the digital market. This is the literal definition of "industrialization": applying technology to convert raw materials into mass-producible products. Its risk is "cultural regression"—when "excessive pursuit of dazzling technological effects neglects the presentation of cultural connotation," technology (the industrialization process) overwhelms the humanities (the cultural understanding core) [18].

5. The Administrative Mechanism of "Industrialization": "Academic Portfolio Review" and Liquidation

The third, and most coercive, layer of the "industrialization" project comes from university Administration.

5.1. The UK Model: The Governance Technique of the "Impact Agenda"

In the UK, the "business valuation" logic is institutionalized through the national-level "Research Excellence Framework" (REF) [19]. The core of the REF is its "impact agenda", which forces university departments to prove their research has "impact beyond academia" as the primary basis for allocating public research funds.

In-depth analysis of the REF shows that "impact" is not a neutral metric, but a governance technique. The universities themselves become "impact gatekeepers," "filtering out" impact narratives deemed "too complex" or "non-commercial". Ultimately, the REF is not measuring impact but actively constructing it as an "auditable phenomenon", "industrializing" the research process itself.

5.2. The US Model: "Managed Decline" and External Liquidation

In the US, university administrations implement the "industrialization" logic through "internal restructuring" and "Academic Portfolio Review." In West Virginia University's (WVU) "Academic Transformation" [20] process, the administration forcibly pushed through the elimination of 32 programs, including all world language, literature, and linguistics courses.

The case of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) serves as "conclusive evidence." The university's cuts (including Religious Studies and Anthropology) [21] were carried out after hiring the external business consulting firm rpk Group [22]. rpk Group's mission was to apply a "business-oriented perspective." Internal emails show that administrators explicitly needed rpk's help to "break the cultural dynamic of organizational inertia here" (i.e., faculty resistance).

The core tool of this process was an "Academic Dashboard" [23], which was used to conduct the "Academic Portfolio Review". The term "Academic Portfolio Review" is borrowed directly from the financial world, meaning administrators treat academic departments like a stock portfolio: sell off "underperforming" assets (like the Religious Studies department), buy "profitable" assets. These three cases together reveal the administrative liquidation model of "business valuation" (see Table 2 for details).

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Institutional "Transformation" Cases.

| Institution/System | Key Figure/Driver | Governing Ideology (Discourse) | Mechanisms/Tools Used | Outcome for the Humanities |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|---|---|
| UK Higher Education System | Government (HEFCE) | "Impact Agenda" | Research Excellence Framework (REF); Narrative case studies | Governance by metrics; forced production of "auditable" research |
| Purdue University (Purdue) | President Mitch Daniels | "Innovation" | "Ideological innovation"; centralization; corporate partnerships | "Weakening faculty power"; casualization of teaching work |
| West Virginia University (WVU) | President Gordon Gee | "Academic Transformation" | "Program review"; budget cuts | Total elimination of 32 majors (including all foreign languages) |
| UNC Greensboro (UNCG) | Administration; rpk Group | "Business-oriented perspective"; "efficiency" | External consulting firm (rpk Group); "Academic Portfolio Review"; "Academic Dashboard" | Elimination of 17+ programs (e.g., Religious Studies, Anthropology) |

Here, "business valuation" is no longer a metaphor. It is the literal practice of "academic capitalism" in higher education management. Humanities departments are treated as "underperforming product lines" in an industrial conglomerate, and administrators apply pure industrial logic: hire external consultants to identify "inefficient" departments, then "liquidate" that "product line" to maximize overall "efficiency".

6. Discussion: The Critical Paradox and the "Post-Humanities" Future

6.1. The Faustian Bargain: The Critical Paradox

The "industrialization" turn of the humanities creates a profound "Faustian paradox." On one hand, as described in Section 3.1, universities are actively "selling" "critical thinking" to the market as the primary business selling point of the humanities, "selling" this "transferable skill." On the other hand, the university's mode of production—that is, neoliberal management (such as the REF's audit culture and UNCG's "dashboard")—is designed precisely to eliminate true, unpredictable, non-commercial critical inquiry.

What the university sells is a neutered "critical thinking" skill, emptied of all its subversive (i.e., critical of power) force. This may ultimately lead to a "dangerous social conformity" [24], which is precisely what the humanities are supposed to vehemently oppose.

6.2. Counter-Narratives and Resistance

Faced with the logic of "business valuation," diverse defense strategies have also emerged from within academia. The first is the "Public Humanities" [25] movement, which attempts to shift the definition of "value" from the commercial (private sector) to the social (public sector), emphasizing "social relevance" and "civic engagement."

The second defense strategy advocates "symbiosis." It argues that the "cultural understanding" of the humanities and "business valuation" can have a complementary relationship. For example, the "empathy, judgment, and wisdom" of the humanities can help economists build "better models," thereby "re-humanizing" [26] other disciplines that are increasingly instrumentalized.

6.3. Marching Towards a "Post-Humanities" Future?

However, the ultimate logical consequence of this "industrialization" turn may be neither the revival of "Public Humanities" nor "symbiosis," but the disintegration of traditional humanities programs and the emergence of a new form—"post-humanities".

Scholars have explicitly linked the emergence of "post-humanities" to the "crisis" of the "neoliberal university". "Post-humanities" is the theoretical generalization of the humanities in this new state. It is no longer defined by a unified mission (like *paideia*) or a set of shared intrinsic values (like "humanity"). Instead, it is defined by its functional position within the "neoliberal university": it is fragmented (being "embedded" in other disciplines), instrumentalized (reduced to "skills"), unstable (facing "portfolio review" at any time, as shown in the WVU and UNCG cases), and technologically accelerated (via DH and "IP-ization").

"Post-humanities" is the form in which the humanities survive by ceasing to be what it traditionally was (a critical, non-instrumental field of inquiry). This, perhaps, is the terminus of the "industrialization" turn.

7. Conclusion

The analysis in this report depicts a profound turn in the humanities from a classical paradigm centered on "cultural understanding" as its core value, to an "industrialization" paradigm dominated by "business valuation." This article's core argument is that this turn is not a scattered compromise, but a systemic project driven by the synergistic action of three major mechanisms: Pedagogical Reorganization, Technological Acceleration, and Administrative Liquidation. Our core findings are that "from cultural understanding to 'business valuation'" is not a metaphor. When Georgia Tech uses "Robin Hood" ballads for interview training, when "Digital Dunhuang" "IP-izes" cultural heritage, and especially when UNCG administrators open the "Academic Dashboard" to decide which humanities departments to "liquidate," what we are witnessing is the literal practice of "business valuation." Humanities, in order to survive institutionally, are forced to adopt a language (ROI, impact, innovation) and practice (marketing, auditing, liquidation) that fundamentally negate their core values. The ultimate price of this turn may be the end of the humanities' core mission (i.e., non-utilitarian critical inquiry) and the "dangerous social conformity" it brings.

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