

# The halo of human flourishing

BY:STEVEN SCHWARTZ

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Steven Schwartz. Picture: Renee Nowytargeter Source: The Australian

**AS a vice chancellor, I conducted many graduation ceremonies and welcomed scores of proud graduates to the "fellowship of educated men and women". One regular feature of these ceremonies was a queue of students of "a certain age" waiting to receive their doctorates in history, literature, philosophy, fine arts or one of the other subjects collectively known as the arts and humanities.**

Their stories were similar. After a career in business, the public service or one of the professions, they returned to university to fulfil a life-long desire to immerse themselves in the arts or humanities. Not once did I encounter a retiree who returned to university driven by a passion for accounting, marketing or business administration. When working life wanes, and mortality is no longer just theoretical, people want to nurture their souls and only the arts can provide the necessary nourishment.

It is wonderful to see people follow their dream, but postponing fulfilment until the end of one's life is a risky strategy. As Seneca, a leader of the Stoics, wrote to a friend, "how late it is to begin to live just when we must cease to live! What foolish forgetfulness of mortality ... "

It is foolish because is it not necessary to choose between building a bank balance and nurturing our souls. We can have both. Marissa Mayer, the chief executive of Yahoo, studied philosophy

and psychology as an undergraduate at Stanford before becoming an early Google employee. While she was at Google, Mayer focused her recruiting strategy on humanities and liberal arts graduates. Why? Because Google wants "people who are smart and get things done" and the skills possessed by arts graduates - problem-solving, clear communication and cultural understanding - are the keys to business success.

So, it is entirely possible for arts graduates to have their cake and eat it. As Damon Horowitz, a Google executive with a humanities PhD, puts it, "you go into the humanities to pursue your intellectual passion; and it just so happens, as a by-product, that you emerge as a desired commodity for industry. Such is the halo of human flourishing".

Knowledge of the humanities enhances all professions. Consider medicine for example. No one would argue that studying the arts makes it easier for a surgeon to remove a diseased prostate, but it would provide the surgeon with the communication skills, empathy and judgement needed to help patients understand and cope with the consequences of the operation.

Similarly, our financiers would not find the study of drama much help in devising the complicated investment instruments that have wrecked such havoc on so many innocent people. But, if they had read Faust, they may have understood that a deal with the devil is rarely a win-win proposition.

And what about our bloviating politicians? Few would see poetry as central to their work. Yet, reading Shelley's "Ozymandias" could help our leaders to put their accomplishments in perspective.

As the new Director of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS), you would expect me to extol their many virtues, but you don't have to take my word for it. This year's CHASS forum will take place at Parliament House Canberra on 20 June 2013. Check out the [topics and speakers](#) and come along. You may be surprised at what you find.

*Emeritus Professor Steven Schwartz AM is the Executive Director of the Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (director@CHASS.org.au)*