Throughout the academic world in the United States, more and more pressure is being put on test scores, which is raising the importance of math, reading, and science. This puts most primary schools in a bind, as they have to put more emphasis on these subject matters to continue to receive funding. All of this limits students’ exposure to other areas of academia that they may have been interested in. This causes many to ponder what effect a push in one subject area and a relaxation in another subject area will have on education.

Along with the education shake up in primary school, post-secondary learning is also going through a shift. Tuition at colleges and universities are extremely high, and they continue to get even higher. This puts pressure on students to finish college as quickly as possible with as little amount of debt as possible. Students, therefore, want to only take classes that are directly related to their major and want to avoid those “filler” classes. This also causes some to wonder will a stress on only some types of classes have an effect on that student later in life.

These two events, for better or worse, are putting a lack of emphasis on the humanities, and making many wonder whether students should even need to take humanities classes at all. This paper aims to analyze the humanities in post-secondary education and find out the good, the bad, and possibly the ugly of the humanities.

To begin looking at the humanities, the humanities need to be defined. The humanities refer to the study of humans, but what classes are covered in that? Usually, the humanities cover things like history, art, music, sociology, philosophy, and literature (Abeles 67). However, this
paper focuses more on the social science realm of the humanities and does not analyze the arts and music side of it to a major degree.

Now that the humanities and current battle with it have been laid out, there are some questions that need to be answered about it. What are the benefits and drawbacks of learning the humanities? What are the financial implications of the humanities? Is there a difference between learning the humanities as someone not planning to get a degree in a humanities field versus getting a degree in a humanities field?

These questions were answered by analyzing a variety of secondary sources and by doing some firsthand research. The first thing to examine was the perspective on the humanities from two opposite perspectives. The side that warrants against further humanities funding (Cohan) had several good points to it, (such as cutting humanities courses out of most colleges to save resources, and the trouble humanities graduates have of finding jobs). Cohan does fail to show a lot a proof for his idea, but they were looked at nonetheless. The other perspective took a higher road and discusses the humanities from a general education standpoint, and talks about them as a general field (Zuckerman and Ehrenberg). However, Zuckerman and Ehrenberg fail to make any conclusions on the humanities, but their ideas will be looked at as they were heavily verifiable.

The next thing to examine was the financial and social implications the humanities have on students and institutions. This was done by examining six scholarly articles. The articles that talk about the social implications (Abeles; Halperin; Slaton; Taylor, Cantwell, and Slaughter) discuss them from the student's viewpoints and from educator's viewpoints. The articles that talks about the financial implications (Eve; Sobel; Taylor, Cantwell, and Slaughter) discusses them from the viewpoints of funding that universities, and in particular libraries, get, and from
the costs perspectives of students. One article (Taylor, Cantwell, and Slaughter) does have a mix of both social and financial implications in their findings.

The final thing to look at was the perspective from two professional post-secondary educators. They are obviously at the heart of this issue and see the implications from it all the time. Their perspectives were obtained through personal interviews and are the firsthand research done for the issue. The first interview (Nichols) was with a general educator, who did not specifically teach on any side of the humanities issue. The second interview (Ashton) was with an educator who teaches classes that are in the humanities field. Both of these interviews sought to get a better understanding of the humanities and link the student to professor viewpoints.

The questions listed above were mostly answered, with some answers leading to more questions and some questions not finding answers. However, start back with the first question: What are the benefits and drawbacks from learning the humanities? There are many answers to this question. Starting with the benefits, Dr. Patrick Ashton, a Sociology professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW), proclaims that the humanities offer some key intangibles to employers: “The three things employers look for, along with the technical side, are critical thinking and problem solving skills, communication skills, and diversity, which a liberal education teaches.” Along with Dr. Ashton, Dr. Joe Nichols, an educating professor at IPFW, also feels that the humanities have some intangibles: “I think that students probably learn an appreciation for other subject areas that are not their strengths, and some people may take a different class and maybe even change their major.”

Besides Dr. Ashton’s and Dr. Nichols’ general benefits of the humanities, Dr. Edward Halperin, the Dean of the School of Medicine at the University of Louisville, had several benefits that he thought the humanities offered to the medical field: “A physician must be able to
express him/herself clearly. The humanities help us to better understand each other and our society and to share that understanding” (77). Halperin also proclaims, “In a technological age of medicine and fleeting time to talk to patients, the heart and soul of clinical care is prone to neglect, A bedrock of empathy and emotions must be insured” (77). In other words, Halperin says that teaching the humanities to future medical workers helps them interact and therefore care for their patients.

Along with the several benefits of the humanities, there were some drawbacks too. To begin with, Dr. Ashton and Dr. Nichols both list the negatives of the humanities in the way that teachers present them and how students perceive them. “I think the negatives are only in the way we present them. I think we present them as hoops to be jumped through, so students don’t take it seriously or take it grudgingly” (Ashton). Peter Cohan, however, had several more drastic drawbacks for the humanities, “Those with majors in zoology, anthropology, philosophy, art history, and humanities, don’t stand much chance of getting jobs requiring a college degree.” While Cohan did not have any sources there to back his claim, it is becoming common knowledge that getting a college job with a degree in a humanities field is difficult. Even Dr. Nichols, who appears to be on the side of the humanities, spouts, “They have to realize there may be some limitations, in that there are not these preset jobs they can apply for, and they may have to do some more homework to get a job.”

Next, the second question: What are the financial implications of the humanities? There are several financial implications from the humanities. To start with, one of the biggest rises in costs to the humanities and therefore students are libraries. Library costs have skyrocketed over the past thirty years, and funding to libraries is having trouble covering the ever increasing prices. (Eve 2). According to Martin Eve, a lecturer of humanities at the University of Lincoln
(UK), “It is now a widely known fact that academic library subscription costs have outstripped inflation by 300% since 1986 and this is reflected proportionally in the humanities” (2). Eve does propose a solution to this problem, by having schools pool together their resources and sharing their access (4). However, this solution does not take care of the real problem, as research in some places will become ever increasingly expensive.

While libraries are struggling to make ends meet, many schools are being forced to cut out entire programs. According to Emily Slaton, a sophomore college student at Texas Luther University, “School administrations have reduced funding, and they now have to make difficult decisions about which programs to cut. Many are choosing to let go of or reduce funding to their fine arts programs and music education in particular” (Slaton 34). Slaton goes on to say, “They are also making uncomfortable accommodations. One such accommodation has been to increase the number of students each educator teaches” (35). So far these examples are being widely seen in primary and secondary schools, but they are the changes that some people are calling for in universities and these changes are starting to appear in them more frequently.

Along with the costs to libraries and schools, students are also facing higher tuition payments. According to Ann Sobel, “Annual tuition has doubled almost three times since 1980, significantly outpacing inflation. Today, student loan debt is the highest in history, at over US $1 trillion” (85). Now, the humanities are not responsible for the increase in tuition costs, but most students do not want to take extra classes at current tuition prices, which, for most students would be humanities classes. On top of that, more students today are planning their future post college career to be able to pay off their student debt, so they are planning to major for jobs with higher pay if they are going for a bachelor’s degree (Sobel 86).
The last financial implication of the humanities is between universities themselves. Barrett Taylor, Brendan Cantwell, and Sheila Slaughter, educators at United States’ Universities, say that colleges compete with one another for students and grants (676). However, this competition hurts the humanities, because universities are not competing for humanities students, instead they are competing for students who are “pursuing business and other vocational area that train to students to hold particular jobs” (Taylor, and Cantwell, and Slaughter 678). Universities are doing this because they are receiving more research money, especially from technology and science, Taylor, Cantwell, and Slaughter say (679).

Finally, the last question: Is there a difference between learning the humanities as someone not planning to get a degree in a humanities field versus getting a degree in a humanities field? In short the answer is yes, but there are several reasons why. For the students who are learning some of the humanities that do not apply to their major, the message is mostly positive. According to Dr. Ashton, “I think there is value in all of education. The average college graduate will have ten or eleven jobs in there working career and one of those jobs has not been invented yet. So how can you prepare for a job that hasn’t been invented yet? Well, in the technical sense you can’t, but in the broader sense you sure can.” So, if a student learns a subject area that is not related to their current major’s job, then it could possibly help he or she out in jobs he or she may have after their first one from college.

On the other hand, there is a lot of mixed feedback for students who are planning to major in a humanities based degree. Dr. Ashton, and Peter Cohan both agreed that students should at least have some trepidation before entering a humanities field.

It is more difficult, and I’m realistic about that. So what I say to sociology majors and would say the same thing to English majors, is yes, in certain areas it is going to be
harder and in certain places you aren’t going to get into. They are going to look at your resume and see your major and toss it or delete it. So, it is hard, and you are going to have to go up to people and tell them what you really know. (Ashton)

Dr. Nichols viewpoint was, “People can go on to graduate school, and then I don’t see that as a problem, but from my own perspective, if one of my kids told me they wanted a degree in the humanities, I would want to know what they can do with that degree.” Even with this information though, students today are still willing to pursue a degree in the humanities.

According to Harriet Zuckerman, a sociology professor at Columbia University, and Ronald Ehrenberg, a professor of Economics and Labor Relations at Cornell University, the number of students getting bachelor’s and doctorate degrees has not declined for the past fifteen years: “students’ interest in the humanities has neither been in ascent or retreat and has stuck around 15% for full time students” (134).

After answering these questions and doing all the research, the consensus with the humanities is clear. Based on all the research, the humanities in post-secondary education should continue to be funded, taught, and recommended to students at four-year institutions. Students wishing to obtain a four-year degree in a humanities field should be cautious and realistic about the future.

To start out with, the humanities help students look at and answer things in new ways and for themselves. For example, students who take a writing class, a sociology class, or a philosophy class may learn to look at things from a new perspective. They may not feel differently about a topic, but they could become more understanding towards the other side. Also these classes can instill the idea in them to take it upon themselves to figure out why things are.

According to Dr. Ashton, “For instance, instead of just sitting in class learning about Socrates or
Plato, ask yourself who the modern day Socrates is. Why do people hate him so much? And why are we even learning about all this stuff in the first place? Who decides that?” (Ashton). These questions and others like it can help students gain a better understanding of not only that class, but of the world as well.

Opponents of the humanities will say that the costs of taking those classes outweigh the benefits received from them. However, the benefits clearly outweigh the costs. To start with, the only real costs incurred are the financial costs of taking the class, but if students did not take that class, they would have taken another one, which would have been for the same amount. The other cost is the opportunity cost it has. The student could have spent the time in that class doing something else or learning another subject. However, there are several greater benefits from taking a humanities class. Other than the reasons listed above and below, humanities classes offer a fresh change of pace from a student’s normal classes, they can help prepare students for untold responsibilities, and they can help students appreciate other courses. The benefits received from a humanities class can help a student over his or her entire life, while the costs will only exist for a short portion of it. The costs do not outweigh the benefits.

Another reason why the humanities should stay in post-secondary education is that they offer certain intangible skills that employers look for. For instance, Dr. Ashton brings up the point, “Well, some students say ‘I’m an engineer, I don’t need to know how to write a paper.’ Well, until you have to write that report to people in Dubai and whether or not you get the contract will depend on that report,” having good writing skills may not be necessary for the engineering major, but it can offer employers a lot of unforeseen benefits and make students more valuable workers. Also Dr. Halperin brought up the point earlier that medical professionals who studied some humanities were able to relate to their patients better. They were giving their
patients better care by this with something they learned outside of medicine. These cases clearly demonstrate how the humanities can offer techniques to students who are not majoring in it, and will help them later in life.

Another drawback opponents of the humanities will bring up is that there is a lack of college job potential for the humanities degrees. This is a true and valid point. Students who major in the humanities do have a harder time finding a job, and there are not these “preset jobs”, as Dr. Nichols put it, other than teaching. Also many students who do end up getting a degree in the humanities may have to go through more schooling, by either going to law school afterwards, or by pursuing a doctorate degree in their humanities field. But most students know this beforehand and are prepared for more education. However, just because there are negatives to getting a humanities degree, that does not mean that universities should stop teaching them altogether. Humanities classes still offer career-oriented majors several real and intangible benefits. Students who do get a degree in the humanities can still be successful as well: they just have to be realistic and realize that it may be harder for them to find a niche, than for students in other majors. However, even students majoring in career-oriented fields may have to get more education as well, to further their career path. Even with this knowledge the level of students who pursue humanities has remained steady for years.

Finally, one of the biggest benefits received from taking some humanities classes is getting a broader education. Getting a broader education not only prepares students for their planned career, but it also can help them if they ever change their careers. Dr. Ashton says,

But, what I tell people is that if you only focus on the technical side of your major and the world changes in five years, then where are you? You are on the ash heap of history, and they hired the latest college graduate. Now what do you do? You’re screwed. So you owe
it to yourself, just from a practical point of view, to get the best and most well rounded education you can, no matter what kind of field you are in.

A broad education helps prepare students in case a disaster like the one above happens, or like a voluntary job or career change. Dr. Nichols also agrees with Dr. Ashton, “Yes, I do think there is value in learning the humanities, because you want to graduate with a well rounded education, so that when you leave college you have knowledge in other areas as well.” Both educators can agree that the humanities give students a better overall education, and this helps prepare them for the job market ahead. They stress the importance of knowledge in several areas that a technical only major would not be able to offer.

The humanities in post-secondary learning offer several advantages to students and society. This paper looked at examples from ten sources and sought to answer several questions about the humanities. The answers to those questions showed that the humanities are worth keeping in secondary education. This paper shows that the benefits outweigh the costs in both the short and long run. Life takes people through many twists and turns, a broad education can help cover anyone through the unseen future ahead.