

Literature Review:

Reinvigorating Humanities in Formal Military Education

Claire Clancy

Arizona State University

ENG 501

## **Abstract**

Since their inception, the United States service academies have been pillars of education, producing professional military officers to lead and serve during peace and conflict. The baccalaureate program, a four-year journey, offers a diverse range of majors, from English to Chemistry. Regardless of discipline, each graduate is awarded a Bachelor of Science, a testament to their comprehensive education. As the world evolves with significant advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and cyber capabilities, the service academies have understandably emphasized majors focusing on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). However, it is crucial to remember the historical significance of humanities and liberal arts in military education. This study delves into the decline of these studies in formal military education, which demands our immediate attention. It underscores the urgent need for reinvigorating a robust curriculum in these disciplines for the future, particularly for military leaders. The study will focus on the three primary United States service academies, each with its unique approach to education and training: the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (USMA), the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis (USNA), and the U.S. Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs (USAFA). The review of literature results in a mixed methodology study of quantitative data and qualitative theories regarding the repercussions of an anemic approach to humanities and liberal arts in military academics. This review will begin with a short introduction to the service academies and a working definition of humanities and liberal arts studies. It will conclude with a general summary regarding the “health of the humanities,” an insight into humanities and war. It will conclude with a reflection on why a decline in the humanities at the United States service academies is deleterious to officers preparing for a lifetime in the profession of arms.

## **A Short Primer: Service Academies and Their Academic Requirements**

The United States service academies are federally funded colleges that provide a rigorous undergraduate education and train future officers to serve in their respective military branches.

The three academies funded by the Department of Defense (DoD) are the U.S. Military Academy (USMA), the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA), and the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA).

Admission to these academies is highly competitive, with each candidate requiring a congressional nomination and passing rigorous academic, physical, and medical tests. This stringent selection process ensures that only the most qualified individuals are admitted, resulting in the matriculation of a 'whole person'-a term used to describe individuals who have been developed in all aspects of their being, including intellectual, physical, and moral dimensions-ready to serve their country and become highly trained military leaders (Kamarck).

While each graduate receives a Bachelor of Science, there are more than 30 majors at each academy to choose from, and this study will specifically focus on the humanities and liberal arts taught at the academies. This study will explore the definitions of humanities and liberal arts, the quantitative and qualitative data evaluating the presence of humanities at the academies, and the repercussions of military academics without a strong representation of these disciplines.

## **What are the Humanities and the Liberal Arts?**

To understand the data within the literature review and to provide context, it is essential to define the two critical terms of the study: liberal arts and humanities. The “liberal arts” is a term originating in the fourteenth century, and it generally encompassed the seven subjects of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) holistically (“Liberal Arts,” *OED*). However, according to the Oxford English

Dictionary, the more modern version is those subjects other than science and technology.

Humanities is a more complex concept as the definition changes from university to university and across almost all mediums of education. While the word “humanity” encompasses so much of the human condition and even refers to kindness, compassion, and benevolence for one’s fellows, this study will limit the use to describe the term in an academic context. Oxford English Dictionary cites several examples of the humanities being used to describe education, namely “the branch of learning concerned with human culture” (“Humanities,” *OED*). The humanities are distinct from social studies and science in the sense that they have a “significant historical element, in the use of interpretation...rather than experimental and quantitative methods, and in having an ideographic rather than nomothetic character” (“Humanities” *OED*).

### **United States and the Humanities: Education Beyond the Service Academies.**

According to several researchers and educators, there is hope that the study of humanities at military academies is still flourishing. The cadets and midshipmen at the academies, they argue, are encouraged to pursue a rigorous study of leadership in the profession of arms through a human lens, understanding deeply the human condition and the ethical and moral complications that war presents. In her article “A View from the United States: The Crisis in the Humanities; the Liberal Arts; and English in the Military Academy,” Marion Thain considers the decline in English majors across US and UK universities and concentrates explicitly on USMA. The 2008 financial crisis and the rise of technology and science have motivated many students to pursue STEM degrees for job insurance and employability (Thain 110).

However, Thain asserts that while many universities are refreshing their curricula to present a more holistic view of English studies and the humanities, she asserts that USMA “seems less immediately troubled by the crisis in the humanities” (Thain 112). She writes, “English at the West Point campus feels perhaps relatively distant from the crisis of the humanities for several reasons” (Thain 113). Not least of these, she concludes, is immunity to the volatile job market as all cadets graduate with a degree and a commission to serve in the United States Army for at least five years (Thain 113). While English majors may be in the minority at West Point, cadets and faculty alike acknowledge the need to foster an appreciation of the humanities, citing examples like morality and ethics during war and understanding the human nature of conflict (Thain 114). As noble and correct as these sentiments may be, are the service academies truly fostering humanities as a course of study? This question remains open for further research and evaluation.

### **The Lifecycle of Humanities at the Academies**

From 2000 to the projected graduates in 2025, the U.S. Air Force Academy has seen a cumulative decline in liberal arts and humanities majors, a subset of which are annotated in Figures 1 and 2 (USAFA). At West Point, the class of 2022 had minimal representation outside of the STEM majors, with English major graduates numbering at only ten and the STEM majors far outstripping the humanities and liberal arts studies (Figure 3) (NCES). The Naval Academy cites the “needs of the Naval Service” as a driving factor in which major midshipmen should choose. As of 2013, at least 65% of the graduating class must have completed academic majors in the STEM disciplines (USNA “Majors and Courses”).

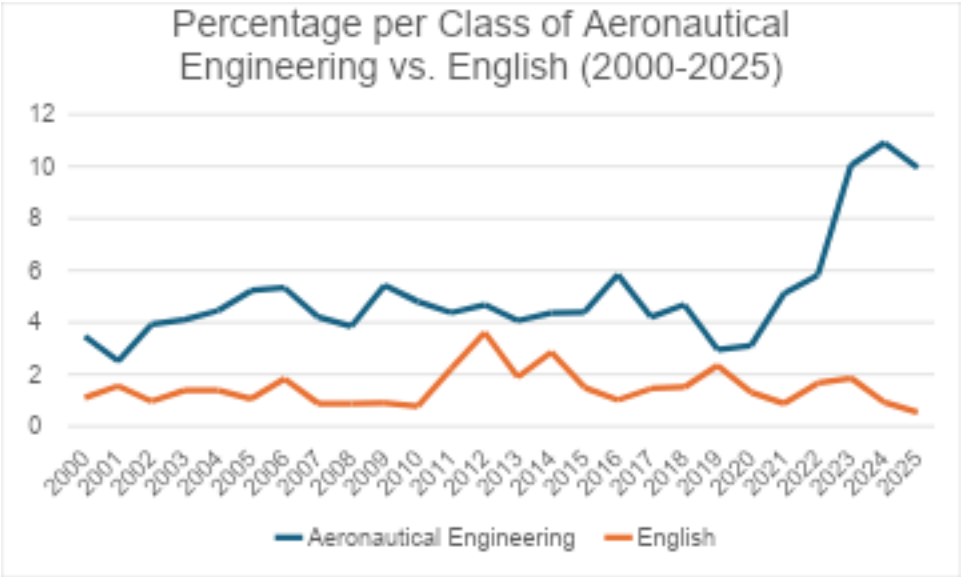


Figure 1

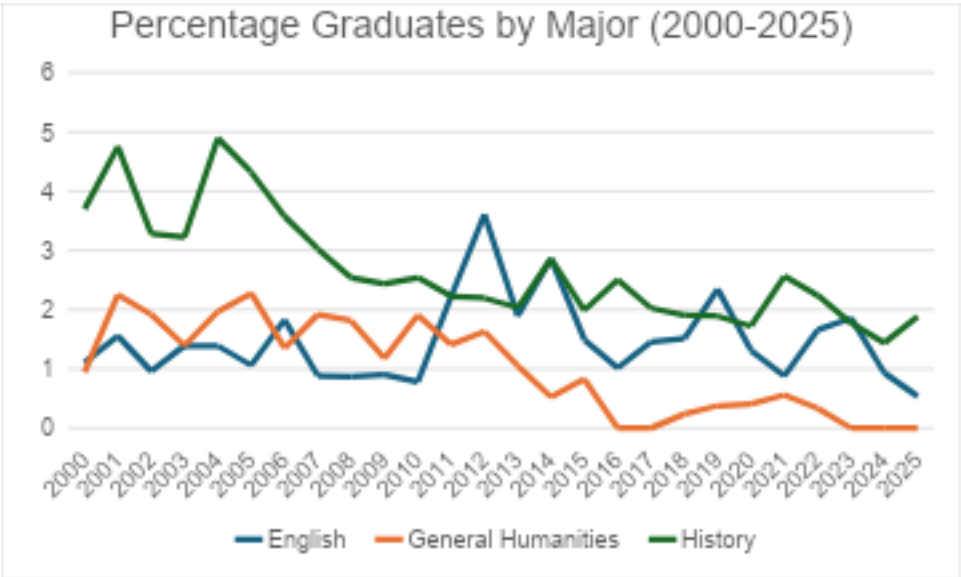


Figure 2

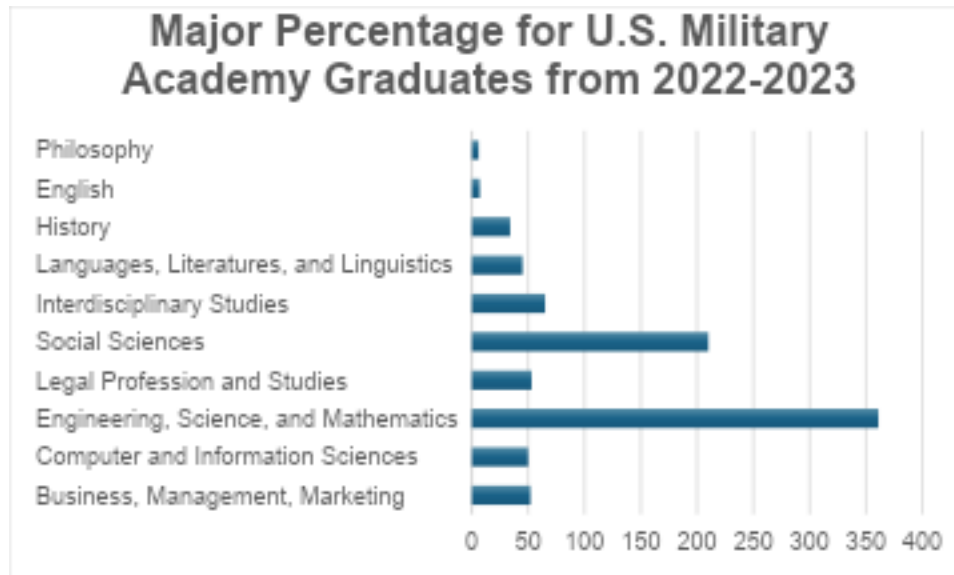


Figure 3

### The Importance of Humanities in War

Warfare continues to evolve; even today, military officers are often called upon to navigate complex moral and ethical labyrinths. Beard explores a bifurcated approach to combat to help navigate this labyrinth, balancing his studies between a deontological aspect of Just War Theory (JWT), which explores the way military force is employed, and the aretaic aspect of JWT, which focuses heavily on the character in the conduct of war (Beard 274). Beard discusses the history of JWT and laments that what used to be an integrated concept of law and morality has been diluted to a set of codified laws that do not explicate the need for “virtue, character, moral psychology and intention” (Beard 275). Actions, Beard writes, no matter how legal, may have deleterious effects on a soldier’s character and morality, and deontological focus detracts from the “instantiation of good deeds” being interconnected with the “moral virtue of the person performing the deed” (Beard 276). Training professional soldiers to be physically and mentally ready for battle requires a profound understanding of what military service entails and the

identity many assume within the service that runs contrary to a humanities and liberal arts-focused education.

A military member's very personality is compatible with warfare's brutal and chaotic nature. In exploring how best to research soldiers, Molendijk describes a life that many Americans will never understand. Forced to integrate and undergo an often shattering socialization experience, soldiers, sailors, and airmen have constructed self-determination theories and struggle with multi-dimensional identities (Molendijk 6). Molendijk expounds on “complicated distinctions between soldiers and civilians, men and women, tough combat soldiers and inferior ‘armchair warriors’, dedicated military veterans and ‘whining’ victims, the political department of defense and the military brotherhood, and enemies and non-combatants” (Molendijk 6). It is an image that is incongruous with the patient academic, reading philosophy and literature to understand the depths of the human condition. However, precisely this understanding helps a soldier survive not only the physical but also the spiritual and transcendental scars of war.

In shaping the landscape for assessing the need for humanities and liberal arts within military education, looking at the legal principles that guide the officers commissioning from service academies is helpful. Eliot Winter expands on Beard’s deontological and aretaic theories of JWT, highlighting principles of the law of armed conflict (LOAC) and the principles of humanities that are lighthouses for compassionate and ethically minded soldiers. In light of understanding the humanities and liberal arts as defined by the OED, the rules and laws of war are essential, but equally so, if not more important, is the character and moral strength to interpret the rules and apply them thoughtfully and ethically (Winter 2). “Humanity” is oft-cited within LOAC treaties



and discourse and is foundational to the principles of armed conflict law, “informing and shaping their contours” (Winter 16). Suppose humanity is fundamental in JWT and the law of armed conflict. In that case, it must educate our military leaders, who will interpret and execute war with the abovementioned principles. The trend for emphasizing the humanities, however, does not look promising.

### **The Need to Reinvigorate the Humanities in Military Education**

While the clash of steel and the need for humanity, empathy, and compassion seem to be at odds, can a robust study of the humanities and liberal arts help an officer recover what Beard says is a fading sense of morality and an unhealthy dependence on law alone? Brian Hanley certainly thinks so. From an anecdotal perspective, Hanley is similar to Beard because, in his opinion, “the authors of the *USAF* [U.S. Air Force] *Leadership Doctrine* give no evidence that they’ve read anything other than technical manuals and magazine advertisements” (Hanley 16). Hanley’s prescription emphasizes the technical dilemmas of warfare and human problems. Officers at service academies, he asserts, should study war, yes, but the *literature* about war. Books like histories, biographies, memoirs, and fiction should be central to the curricula at the academies. Doing so not only cultivates critical thought and empathy but also produces graduates and officers who are “wide adjudicators of moral and intellectual excellence in its various professional forms” (Hanley 16).

Geoffrey Harpham concurs with Beard, writing that “the [U.S. Air Force] Academy is not known for its dedication to literary study” (Harpham 35). Harpham writes that throughout a seminar discussing Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* with cadets, officers, and faculty, there was a distinct

cognitive dissonance between the aspirant profession of many cadets and the compassion and humanity with which they approached the text (Harpham 39). During the seminar, a Lieutenant Colonel said the following:

“I wear this uniform because I believe that, in the end, our way of life is better than any other at defending the *sanctity of the individual*. My understanding of history teaches me that violence will always be part of human existence, and moral sense says that managed violence, in the service of the correct principles, is better than the alternatives. What we try to do here...is train...*reluctant killers*. We teach them how to do things that will haunt them for the rest of their lives... We stand there in front of our cadets, and we train them to do things they would never do if the nation didn’t ask it of them. And even though the nation asks it, and no matter how disciplined they are, they will still be haunted by what they’ve done. And they have to be. If they aren’t, then we’ve only trained... murderers without a conscience (Harpham 41).

This view, Harpham asserts, is exactly why the military perspective on the humanities is critical in education and must be cultivated through formal study (Harpham 42). The aforementioned Lieutenant Colonel wrote his own take on the necessity of humanities at military institutions. LtCol Thomas McGuire echoes and reinforces Harpham’s view from a military perspective, reminding us that the business of war necessarily changes and transforms lives within seconds (McGuire 26). Both Harpham and McGuire emphasize that war “has always depended on the diminishment, the effacement, the annihilation of the individual” (McGuire 26) and that a comprehensive and thorough humanities curriculum helps to remind professional soldiers of the sanctity and value of human life (McGuire 29). Far from being antithetical to producing courageous and compassionate leaders, the humanities is a cornerstone in ensuring graduates of

service academies are deeply invested in what it means to be human, both in preserving and taking lives.

### **What More Needs to be Done?**

Without question, the military and the officers serving must have a vast knowledge of the technical requirements of their profession. Nevertheless, the need for a humanities and liberal arts-driven curriculum cannot be overlooked. Even in 1943, during the height of World War II and all its brutality, Max Black and Arthur E. Murphy wrote that “this war cannot be restricted to the demands of military efficiency; we have still to recognize the obligation to educate a generation of “citizen soldiers” who will continue to be citizens when they have ceased being soldiers” (Black and Murphy 122).

While exploring empirical data quantifying the impact of humanities in educating soldiers and sailors may be challenging, significant effort must be allocated to critically evaluating the risks of a primarily STEM-oriented education. Comprehensive research should be conducted across all branches of the U.S. armed forces, requesting insight from leaders about the value of formalized presentation of humanities and liberal arts in military education. Within the context of history specifically, Dr. Eric A. Sibul warns that “the inability to grasp all of the complexities of the human condition” leads to an insular way of approaching military history and can result in a prescriptive methodology instead of encouraging liberal and constructive thought (Sibul 83).

It could be helpful to explore the ratio of civilian to military professors in each of the disciplines at the service academies from which educational priorities could be extrapolated. Do the

humanities need more military professors? Lucretia Flammang states, “The long history of the fine arts at the service academies should be as much a part of the narrative of their educational tradition as engineering is” (Flammang 3).

## Conclusion

While attendees and faculty at the service academies may be passionate about and committed to studying English, social sciences, history, and other less technical fields, the facts are evident. All three service academies are focused on promoting a more technical education program and encouraging America’s future military officers to specialize in STEM. However, the literature on the consequences of military leaders' lack of proper education and appreciation of the arts and the humanities is vast. True, the military is in the business of war, but in preserving peace and winning in war, soldiers, sailors, and airmen must be cognizant of the human aspect of their job. As Matthew Beard writes, “The modern soldier is no longer simply a warrior: he or she) is at once peacekeeper, diplomat, leader, sibling and friend” (Beard 274). In 1888, Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan saw the danger of marginalizing the humanities in favor of STEM disciplines. He wrote:

Have we not ourselves much to blame for it in this exclusive devotion to the mechanical matters? Do we not hear, within and without, the scornful cry of disparagement that everything is done by machinery in these days, and that we are waxing old and decaying, ready to vanish away? Everything done by machinery! As if the subtlest and most comprehensive mind that ever wrought on this planet could devise a machine to meet the innumerable incidents of sea and naval war (Sibul 86).

Teaching prospective officers at service academies a robust and invigorating humanities curriculum can help prepare them for the life-and-death decisions that their careers may demand.

The humanities are not just the study of canonical fiction. They explore the human condition that military officers are expected to navigate daily. The humanities must not only be protected at the service academies; they must be championed.

Works Cited

- Beard, Matthew. "Virtuous Soldiers: A Role for the Liberal Arts?" *Journal of Military Ethics*, vol. 13, no. 3, Oct. 2014, pp. 274–94. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1080/15027570.2014.977546>.
- Black, Max, and Arthur E. Murphy. "Liberal Arts in Wartime." *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1943, pp. 121–25. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1975086>. Accessed 5 June 2024.
- Flammang, Lucretia A. "The Place of the Humanities at a Military Academy." *Academe*, vol. 93, no. 4, July 2007, pp. 30–33. EBSCOhost, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=trh&AN=25990756&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=trh&AN=25990756&site=ehost-live&scope=site).
- Hanley, Brian. "Why Study the Literature of War?" *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, Nov. 2008, pp. 15–18. EBSCOhost, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=36986957&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=36986957&site=ehost-live&scope=site).
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "The Depths of the Heights: Reading Conrad with America's Soldiers." *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 20, no. 1–2, 2008, pp. 35–43. EBSCOhost, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2009700408&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2009700408&site=ehost-live&scope=site).
- "Humanity, N., Sense I.2.b." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8092951565>.
- Kamarck, Kristy N. *Defense Primer: Military Service Academies*. Report no. IF11788, 12 Sept. 2023.

“Liberal Arts, N.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023,  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2854921205>.

Molendijk T, Kalkman JP. Towards a Soldier-Based View in Research on The Military: An Empathetically Critical Approach. *Social Sciences*. 2023; 12(2):51.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020051>.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). "Completions (Number of Awards Conferred) 2022-2023." *College Navigator*, U.S. Department of Education, 2024,  
<https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=West+Point&s=all&id=197036#programs>.  
Accessed 5 June 2024.

Sibul, Eric A. "Military History, Social Sciences, and Professional Military Education." *Baltic Security & Defence Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, Jan. 2011, pp. 71–99. EBSCOhost,  
[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=62006081&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=62006081&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

"Teaching Humanities at America's Military Academies." *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 20, no. 1–2, 2008, pp. 14–43. EBSCOhost,  
[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2009700403&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2009700403&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

Thain, Marion. "A View from the United States: The Crisis in the Humanities; the Liberal Arts; and English in the Military Academy." *Essays and Studies*, vol. 71, Annual 2018, pp. 109–116. Gale Literature Resource Center,  
[link.gale.com/apps/doc/A576211046/LitRC?u=asuniv&sid=summon&xid=41029c03](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A576211046/LitRC?u=asuniv&sid=summon&xid=41029c03).  
Accessed 1 June 2024.

Thomas G. McGuire. "War Literature, the Constitution, and Fostering Reluctant Killers." *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, Nov. 2008, pp. 24–30. EBSCOhost, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=36986959&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=36986959&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

United States Air Force Academy "Fields of Study per Class from 1959-2025," 2024.

United States Naval Academy. "Majors and Courses." *United States Naval Academy*, [www.usna.edu/Academics/Majors-and-Courses/index.php](http://www.usna.edu/Academics/Majors-and-Courses/index.php). Accessed 5 June 2024.

Winter, Elliot. "Pillars not Principles: The Status of Humanity and Military Necessity in the Law of Armed Conflict." *Journal of Conflict & Security Law*, vol. 25, no. 1, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 1–25, doi:10.1093/jcsl/kraa001.