Vocation is not vulgar, and advocates need not run from practical application of humanistic disciplines, which have deep historical precedent, Anthony Cummins writes.

The current state and future prospects of the humanities are occasioning considerable anxious comment. Many humanists are sadly resigned to a belief that the humanities have irrevocably ceded pride of place to the social sciences and sciences; and, indeed, the social sciences and sciences generate and command much intellectual energy in the 21st-century university, for understandable reasons.

The usual remedies proposed for this state of affairs have seemed to me to be limited at best and perhaps even misguided. A typical argument for the utility of the humanistic disciplines is that studying them enhances critical thought and powers of expression, and one would certainly agree.

But I wonder whether such an argument will gain much traction with college-age students and especially their parents. The data suggest a clear national trend away from the humanistic disciplines toward those that seem to offer a different kind of promise or outcome: a vocational utility or practical applicability. Under such circumstances, abstract arguments about the enhancement of critical thought – no matter how skillfully they are advanced, no matter how much one might agree with them – are less likely to prevail.

I propose here one different kind of case for the humanities, one that identifies – and celebrates – their specific vocational utility.

Now, many of my fellow humanists, I suspect, will be troubled – even offended – by such an argument: the humanities ought not to be sullied by vulgar assertions about their supposed practicality. But there would be an irony in that response to my argument.

As a historian, I – like all historians – have invariably found it informative, illuminating and useful to consider the historical context and precedents for the issue at hand. And as a student of the Italian Renaissance, I have always found it ironic that, notwithstanding likely present-day resistance to evaluating the humanities in terms of their vocational utility, they enjoyed the considerable prestige they enjoyed during the Italian Renaissance and thereafter precisely because of their perceived practical utility.

Currently, the humanities, relative not only to the current place of the sciences but also to the place of the humanities during the Italian Renaissance, have withdrawn from a prominent role in the public arena, and this, I suspect, is one of the causes of their momentarily precarious state. During the Italian Renaissance, on the other hand, the humanistic disciplines were prestige subjects of study expressly because they enjoyed a relationship to the political and social order – because those with political authority saw real practical value in encouraging humanistic study and employing those who had undertaken and completed it.
The adherents of the studia humanitatis held posts in the governments of the Italian cities and courts of the 15th and 16th centuries; their skills enabled them to serve their employers effectively as speech and letter writers, historians of the state, diplomats and government magistrates. They wrote elegant prose that was then deployed in diplomatic dispatches and letters and in speeches that they or their employers - the bearers of political authority - delivered effectively and persuasively, in part due to the elegance of the language, in part to the emphasis characteristic of the humanist program on skilled oratorical delivery. If I understand correctly, this is the collective opinion of a succession of distinguished historians of the Italian Renaissance: Paul Oskar Kristeller; Lauro Martines; Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine; James Hankins; and others.

Precisely how were such linguistic and literary skills leveraged as professional assets? In the words of one student of Renaissance humanism, rhetoric "was ... effective in the daily encounters of the tribunal, marketplace, and political forum, not to mention in diplomatic and personal correspondence. Artful communication ... became an instrument for gaining or maintaining power." Grafton and Jardine have written that the skills

...inculcated had an established practical value in fifteenth-century Italy. The ability to speak extemporaneously on any subject in classical Latin, the ability to compose formal letters to order in the classical idiom... were... valuable assets. Equipped with them the student could serve as an ambassador, or secretary to a government department... In other words, although the programme was strictly literary and non-vocational, it nevertheless opened the way to a number of careers...[T]he independence of liberal arts education from establishment values is an illusion. The individual humanist is defined in terms of his relation to the power structure, and he is praised or blamed, promoted or ignored, to just the extent that he fulfills or fails to fulfill those terms. It is... a condition of the prestige of humanism in the fifteenth century, as Lauro Martines stresses, that "the humanists... were ready to serve [the ruling] class."

"In this setting," Grafton and Jardine continue, "the rhetoric of humanism represents the power of Latinity and eloquence as actual power - as meshed with civic activity in a close and influential relationship."

As models for their linguistic practices, the Italian Renaissance humanists turned to familiar and newly recovered classical texts, and the classicizing character of university education in the post-Renaissance European and Europeanized world is directly attributable to the influence of the Renaissance humanists, who advocated strenuously and successfully for the virtues of their particular disciplines. As late as the mid-to-late 19th century, venerable American liberal arts colleges offered a course of study for the A.B. degree that continued to feature classical texts, almost to the exclusion of other subject matter. (The course of study for the A.B. at such institutions also included some more limited course work in "geometry and conic sections," algebra, plane and spherical trigonometry, mechanics, "general chemistry and the non-metals," and additional subjects other than classical languages and literatures.)

So persuasive had the Italian humanists been in their advocacy that, centuries later, the course of study in the classic 18th- and 19th-century American liberal arts college continued to reveal the influence of the Italian Renaissance, notwithstanding the challenges one would have faced in arguing compellingly for the continuing utility of such an educational tradition in 18th- and 19th-century America. The Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn wrote that "[t]he classics of the ancient world are everywhere in the literature of the [American] Revolution," "everywhere illustrative... of thought. They contributed a vivid vocabulary..., a universally respected personification... of political and social beliefs. They heightened the colonists' sensitivity to ideas and attitudes otherwise derived." And, indeed, James Madison, A.B., LL.D.
Princeton University, 1771, 1787, mastered several ancient languages before “fathering” the American Constitution.

Harvard president and chemist James Bryant Conant could write as late as the 1950s that “[in] Europe west of the Iron Curtain, the literary tradition in education still prevails. An educated man or woman is a person who has acquired a mastery of several tongues and retained a working knowledge of the art and literature of Europe.”

Now, what does one learn from this brief primer on the historical context? First, that advocacy — the kind of advocacy characteristic of the Italian Renaissance humanists, who, according to Kristeller and those who wrote after him, wrested a temporary position of preeminence in their society precisely through the force and effectiveness of their advocacy — is perfectly acceptable, and carries no risk of coarsening the quality of the enterprise: a succession of Italian Renaissance humanists beginning with Petrarch advocated spiritedly for their program, and one could scarcely argue that their intellectual achievement was cheapened as a result of that advocacy.

And second, that such advocacy is especially successful when it legitimately emphasizes vocational utility and professional applicability, when it advances an argument that one’s field of study leads incontrovertibly to coveted careers and has concrete benefits for the state and for the political and social order. Let us be spirited advocates, therefore, and celebrate the utility of the humanities as one of the justifications for studying them.

Could a similar, and similarly effective, case be made today for the humanistic disciplines? I believe so. In what ways could one argue — reasonably, justifiably, and therefore persuasively — that the humanities have direct professional viability, and that one can therefore envision and countenance studying them not only because of the intrinsic intellectual satisfactions of doing so or merely because their study enhances critical thought or powers of expression in some abstract sense, but also because there is true, clear utility to doing so?

It would not be difficult to inventory a considerable number of coveted professions and enterprises where humanistic training is not only professionally valuable, but indispensable. I offer just a few possibilities here, and the list could easily be extended, I should imagine. (For example, Lino Pertile suggested the importance of humanistic training to careers in the growing nonprofit sector.)

And my argument is that, in our advocacy for the humanities, we should not be at all reluctant to make much fuller and more explicit reference to their career utility.

What would a 21st-century inventory of concrete vocational applications of the humanities look like? For example:

A field that embraces what was once termed bioethics and related areas. When one addresses and attempts to resolve such pressing public-policy issues as stem-cell research, abortion, the availability of health care, female genital mutilation, AIDS, epidemics and pandemics, and many others, a satisfactory resolution of the problems encountered will depend not solely on scientific and medical expertise, but also a command of the time-honored questions of the ancient discipline of philosophy: notions of justice (for example, determining how to distribute justly limited resource like health care); morality; and
ethics. These are urgent matters that require a humanist’s expertise and the philosophers’ millennia of experience in analyzing such vexing issues. The career possibilities in international health organizations, government agencies, non-government organizations, and think tanks seem promising. The indispensability of the humanities to the successful practice of this field is such that it is now often termed the medical humanities.

**Architecture and urban planning.** The architect and urban planner creates the built environment (an urgent and practical, enterprise, in that human beings require spaces in which to live and work), and in doing so, he or she functions at the nexus of the political-economic, the social, and the aesthetic; the architect and urban planner is equal parts humanist (who deploys aesthetic sensibilities in the design work) and sensitive reader of the practical social, political, and economic contexts within which he or she necessarily operates. Enlightened city planning offices welcome colleagues with such sensibilities.

**Foreign service and diplomacy.** Never before has there been a more urgent need for skilled readers of cultural difference. A sensitive humanistic understanding of other cultures, acquired above all through the rigorous study of foreign languages (and literatures), will be indispensable in coming to terms with such developments as the encounter of Islam and the European and Europeanized worlds. The repercussions for so practical a consideration as American national security are obvious, and one can imagine many outlets for such skills in government service.

**Various modes of public discourse (or “writing in action,” as my former Tulane colleague Molly Rothenberg has termed it).** By this I mean the effective use of language in the public arena, such as journalism (both print and broadcast, and, increasingly, digital) or television and motion-picture screenwriting. But it could also be extended to embrace advertising (increasingly web-based, which entails yet another humanistic skill, the aesthetic sense required in the visual and aural material that now invariably complements text); web-page design (which, once more, will entail a fusion of the visual, aural, and textual); and related enterprises. The humanist’s command of the aesthetic complexities of text and language, visual image, and aural material, and their simultaneous deployment will be indispensable. Indeed, the digital technologies of the 20th and 21st centuries are so powerful, and the full reach of the transition currently under way so difficult to apprehend, that one can only speculate as to what shape human communication will take when the shift to a new paradigm is more or less complete. (Indeed, humanistic sensibilities may prove to have a salutary, tempering influence on the effects of digital technologies.) The skillful fusion of still and moving images, aural material, and text will determine the effectiveness of MOOCs, which will depend as much on humanistic skills as scientific and technical.

**Rhetoric and oratory.** This element is related to the previous one. The electronic information technologies that emerged beginning with the invention of the telegraph in the 19th century have a characteristic that makes them unlike manuscript copying and print: they “dematerialize” information and make it possible for it to be disseminated with lightning speed across vast distances. And the invention of radio, film, and television added the elements of the aural and moving visual to those that had characterized the medium of print (and manuscript copying before it): written text and still image. These newer technologies more closely replicate “live” human experience, and much more closely than print, which freezes discourse, and alters its character. As a technology, print (and the media associated with it) have been giving way to electronic technologies, with their capacity for the full integration of written and spoken language, still and moving image, and sound (music and other aural material), and
for the dematerialization and dissemination of such information. The implication for colleges and universities is as follows: we have invested admirably in initiatives designed to train our students to write well and read texts critically and perceptively. But given the power of the new technologies, there is a case to be made for a return to greater instruction in rhetoric and oratory, to an equal command of the spoken word, which can be captured on audio- or videotape or broadcast over radio, television, and the computer (via Skype), in a guise that print has never demanded. The development of electronic communication technologies that permit us to communicate extemporaneously over vast distances in a conversational tone and manner, suggests that we might well rethink our educational system to feature once again the time-honored humanistic practice of effective oratory and refine our students’ facility in the spoken word.

One need only consider the example of Barack Obama’s skilled oratory (or Franklin Roosevelt’s, or Ronald Reagan’s, or John Kennedy’s) to appreciate the importance to the political order of a venerable humanistic skill like oratory; these are political figures who postdate the development of electronic technologies, notably. Columnist George F. Will has observed that the American presidency is “an office whose constitutional powers are weak but whose rhetorical potential is great.”

By no means do the new electronic information technologies obviate the need for continuing skill in other, more traditional and familiar humanistic modes of communication – the kind of careful, comprehensive, subtle argument that written text affords – and the close, sensitive reading and command of existing texts that inform the authorship of new texts. Henry Riecken suggested that “[t]he text of the Federalist Papers was put into machine-readable form in order to carry out an analysis that resolved questions of disputed authority of some of the papers; but the new format did not replace the bound volumes for readers who want to absorb the thoughts and reflect on the aspirations of this stately document.”

Art conservation, and its relationship to the political economy. Nations with an exceptional legacy of monuments in the visual arts (Italy being an well-known example) face a particular challenge with respect to maintaining the condition of that legacy. And in Italy’s case, the relationship of the condition of that legacy to the economy is obvious: given the central place of tourism in the Italian economy, it is vital that the nation’s artistic patrimony be satisfactorily conserved. Sensitive art conservation is at the intersection of the humanistic (the aesthetic), the scientific and technological (an understanding of the nature of surfactants and the effects of environmental conditions), and the political-economic (the need to balance the claims of conserving the artistic patrimony acceptably against other claims on public resources).

What is interesting about this list is how closely its elements are aligned with the Italian Renaissance humanist’s earlier construction of the studia humanitatis. The kind of ethical reasoning demanded in successful practice of the medical humanities is, in its way, a modern iteration of the Renaissance humanist’s moral philosophy; 21st-century applications of writing, rhetoric, and oratory are, in their way, contemporary versions of the Renaissance humanist’s grammar, poetry, and rhetoric; the understanding of foreign cultures and languages required for effective foreign service in today’s bewilderingly complex and interdependent world is, in its way, the modern expression of the Renaissance humanist’s practice of history. The foundational elements of the core humanistic program have perhaps not changed so very much.
What is different is the explicitness with which the Renaissance humanists advocated — persuasively, compellingly, successfully — for the professional utility of their disciplines, which permitted them to secure a place of considerable prestige and authority in their world. There is warrant for their 21st-century successors’ advancing a similar argument: that one undertake the study and practice of the humanistic disciplines not only within the confines of the academic world (as intrinsically worthwhile, in a fundamental intellectual sense) but outside them as well (as critical to the successful execution of one’s expressly professional and vocational responsibilities).

Specifically, I propose that we self-consciously reframe the presentation and delivery of the humanistic offerings of the modern-day college and university to make much more explicit reference to their potential applicability: that we foreground this kind of argument for their virtues. Some of what is now being done within the university is being done absentmindedly, so to speak, without a sufficiently self-conscious articulation of why we do what we do. Were we to reframe our offerings in this way — reposition the humanities and articulate their virtues differently — we might find that the national trend away from them could be halted and perhaps even reversed.

My sense is that many students rather naturally hunger for the humanistic disciplines and are driven to make other curricular choices in part because of concerns about career viability. Were such concerns addressed — legitimately, effectively, persuasively — we might find some such students willing to study what their hearts prompt them to study. In our curriculums, were we to foreground explicit, purposeful reference to the ways in which the humanities are indispensable to the successful practice of some of the esteemed and rewarding professions identified above (rewarding in several senses of that word), we might succeed in alleviating student (and parental) anxiety about the practicality of studying such supposedly “impractical” subjects.

Only by such means, I believe, will the humanities truly be able to re-secure the place they once enjoyed, and still deserve, in the collective cultural imagination and in the great public arena. And by no means should we be hesitant about advancing such an argument, since we have the example of the Italian Renaissance before us: it would be difficult to argue that energetic advocacy on grounds of vocational viability compromised the artistic and intellectual integrity of the achievements of Petrarch and his venerated successors.