Photo of the Day



A student labels a project at the UConn Innovation Zone on April 23, 2026. Students had to complete a training module before being able to use the tools. PHOTO BY NORA MARIANO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Engineering without the liberal arts is a broken machine

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As my second year of studying engineering at the University of Connecticut comes to a close, I must admit that I have sometimes found myself wishing I had chosen a small liberal arts college instead. There is an indispensable spirit of inquiry in a liberal arts education, one that pushes us to pose the essential questions: where we've been, where we are and where we're going. Our engineering curriculum is admittedly excellent at promoting hands-on learning and problem-solving, yet it would do well with a deeper discussion of which problems we are actually trying to solve.

I can't help feeling like I'm missing out on a crucial part of my education, one that no engineering degree is complete without. The liberal arts ought to be a foundational pillar of engineering education.

To be clear, it is not the size of a school which prevents it from providing a liberal arts education, nor are the liberal arts exclusive to ivy-covered halls or picturesque campuses in the middle of the woods. Simply put, instead of teaching a student what to think, a liberal arts education is intent on teaching a student how to think. This process encompasses everything from the pedagogy of individual professors to the surrounding campus culture.

As I am currently pursuing a dual degree in environmental engineering and English, I admittedly approach this issue from a unique angle. In my experience, English classes at this school are discussion-based, as well as lively and insightful. I see no reason why a core part of the engineering curriculum shouldn't be the same way. After all, the nature of English is not wholly different from the nature of engineering. It too addresses problems and tries to solve them.

For instance, Edmund Spenser's demonization of Irish people in his 1596 essay on Ireland was problematic and devastating. First, there are basic questions to answer: What literary mode did he employ? What are the overarching themes? But then, there are the important questions: Why did he hold that view, and why did he put it forth? How did it influence public sentiment toward Irish people and Britain's colonization of Ireland? And how can understanding this example of human hatred and its power help us combat similar hatred in the present? Those are the problems we attempt to solve, with the understanding that while they do not have simple answers, the quest for answers is nonetheless imperative.

Engineering, really, is no different. The problems it attempts to solve are just as complex, unruly and important. There are the technical aspects, like deciding which engineering model would be most applicable for a given contaminated river. Then, there are the larger problems, too often overlooked, wherein we peel back the "givens:" Why is contamination present in the first place? Is simply ensuring that contaminant levels are diluted by the time they reach drinking water sources the best way to solve the problem? Could we alter the means of production from the polluting facility, for example, so it stops discharging those contaminants? What precedent does this set for future designs? And what, actually, is our end goal? These questions may not help you build an engineering system, but they guide you in determining the kind of system you want to build, which is ultimately more important.

Yet this whole-brain approach to engineering is neither emphasized nor practiced nearly enough. Sure, our school, like any school, supports the idea of exploratory education on paper. UConn regularly boasts about their general education program: an overflowing course catalog featuring the option for a multidisciplinary engineering degree. However, both the curriculum and the culture fall short.

For one thing, it is not enough to enforce a flawed general education program that students regularly shirk off, nor does it add much to require engineering majors to take a single philosophy course. That is to say, it is not enough to treat reflection and critical thinking about the world and our impact on it as a separate muscle from problem-solving; rather, it should be our overarching approach.

For another, the College of Engineering culture too often touts no greater achievement than a high-paying job, inundated with discussions of internship applications, myriad professional development extra-curriculars and "representatives from Lockheed Martin in ITE from 5 to 7 p.m.!" It's not that there aren't talks on impactful engineering research — there are — but it is rare that I see them generate the same buzz. Activities like undergraduate research, Formula SAE and Steel Bridge Design Club are important, but they overwhelmingly center on doing and making (or perhaps resume-building) while lacking reflection on the broader impact of the work being done. There are obviously exceptions, but in general these are the waters engineers swim in.

While engineering as a discipline is readily praised for its ability to solve those big problems our society faces, I must ask: Are we really preparing students to do so if we only ever ask them to do, do, do and never to think?

We cannot teach engineers only how to build, foregoing all discussion of what we are building and why. It would be like teaching a student to use a pen without ever giving them the chance to think about what it is they want to say. What good — in the true sense of the word — can that serve?



Students leave the Austin Building heading onwards to their next class, Storrs, CT, Oct. 6, 2025. The Austin Building is home to UConn's English department. PHOTO BY NATHAN GALICINAO, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS



Students at a Shop Safety Session hosted by the UConn Steel Bridge Design group. The organization is one of many UConn clubs that aims to teach students hands-on engineering skills. PHOTO COURTESY OF @UCONNBRIDGEDESIGN ON INSTAGRAM.