

**SYMPOSIUM ON THE FUTURE OF THE HUMANITIES**

**School of Advanced International Studies  
Johns Hopkins University  
Washington, D.C.  
March 29, 2011**

**“The Humanities in the University”**

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I am not sure which is more daunting: to be the panelist assigned the task of addressing how higher education can revitalize the humanities or, as the final panelist, to recognize that I had better not unduly delay the start of our post-symposium reception. As colleagues here know well, pronouncing confidently on behalf of others on important topics and knowing when to cease and desist are two skills essential to longevity in the university presidency. So let me offer brief reflections to help shape the final discussion during a day of stimulating dialogue.

Understanding I followed distinguished speakers who would address the ideals and potential role of the humanities in academia and beyond, and intrigued by the question of this session concerning the engagement of the public in the humanities, I will focus my reflections on the life of the humanities as lived out in the sector of higher education in which I have spent my professional career: moderately selective, small and mid-sized private institutions. My current school, Alvernia University, is a Franciscan university on the edge of a racially diverse city, educating 3,000 students of all backgrounds and ages, many from low-income families new to higher education.

In addition, we sponsor an innovative Seniors College for retirees, with a diverse faculty offering a separate curriculum comprised of four-week mini-courses. By demographic profile, schools like my own are in fact representative of the general public or, at least, that portion fortunate to have some college education.

As context for my reflections, I asked members of my university's humanities faculty to share thoughts on the symposium's themes. I also interviewed two groups of students, including some in my own current team-taught interdisciplinary honors course, "Faith and Doubt in Modern Literature." In addition, I talked with an eclectic sampling of first-year students, most of them majoring in professional programs like Business, Nursing, and Occupational Therapy.

At schools like mine with substantial general education distribution requirements, students have little sense of the humanities as a collective concept. But, I might note, they have an active understanding of the humanities *disciplines* that comprise our general education program—philosophy and theology as well as literature, language, and history.

Whether humanities majors or not, students are drawn to humanities courses because, in their words, such courses "help me to see myself," "to open my mind," "to walk a mile in another's shoes," "to visit other cultures and historical eras." Humanities courses, several noted, push them "far outside [their] comfort zone" and encourage creative, open-ended thinking rather than memorization and more passive learning.

One non-major, while acknowledging he liked his intended major, announced rather proudly to a large group of fellow first year students, that his philosophy course had, in contrast, far greater personal significance: it compelled him to re-examine his beliefs. Humanities courses, said one older student, "made [him] squirm," by posing uncomfortable questions and forcing him to question unexamined assumptions.

Without prompting, students praised humanities courses as opportunities for dialogue and community-building, in contrast to courses where learning the material seemed more a private matter between instructor and student. And, as I pointed out to one group, they had praised humanities courses for apparently contradictory but really interconnected reasons: *both* for prompting deep self-reflection *and* for challenging them to look beyond themselves to probe beliefs and cultures quite different from their own.

Interestingly, several students thought that even some of their best teachers were far too defensive about the value of required study of humanities disciplines. At times faculty teaching these courses appeared apologetic that such study took attention away from students' majors. "If *they* don't act like this is very very important," said one student, "there's no chance students will think so."

Faculty members, not surprisingly, identify far more strongly with the humanities themselves, regardless of their disciplines, and emphasize the intrinsic value of such study cited by today's earlier speakers. They are careful to distinguish between humanities education and liberal arts education (which they defined as including math and science) and naturally are more likely to question some of the assumptions of today's program.

Some, in fact, saw the research university as fostering the same position of privilege for the sciences--amply funded by sponsored research--as reflected in the prevailing societal preoccupation with scientific and technological progress. For them, the conception of the sciences as providing objective, useful knowledge and the preoccupation with measurement in the contemporary university somewhat inevitably marginalize the humanities as subjective, impractical and—therefore--less important. In this view, it is the *university* not the humanities that needs revitalization, even redemption, a sentiment echoed in recent critiques by Frank Donoghue and others.

Many of my humanities colleagues argued forcefully against the contemporary tendency to emphasize the practical application of humanities study. In their view, an instrumentalist approach was in fact self-defeating and, as one colleague insisted, serves only to cheapen the humanities. Claims that the humanities were invaluable in teaching communication skills or critical and creative thinking are foolhardy, noted one professor. Such skills can be fostered by other fields that appear to have (and do have) far greater practical use on the job market.

Nor should the humanities be understood merely as part of the process of acquiring information, noted one colleague, as if education were like filling a car with gasoline or transferring a computer file. For him, developing the computer analogy, humanities education is about changing the hardware not the software of one's computer: it is the pursuit of "intellectual maturation, the structural change of the mind."

In my view, this conception of the humanities leads us naturally to how the humanities might be more central to the life of the university and to our students. Needed, first, in the words of one colleague, is "an apologetics for the humanities" that effectively asserts the

importance of human development—the growth of humans as humans more than as productive workers. While a compelling case for the humanities includes the development of essential skills, skill development should be viewed as an appealing *byproduct* of such study, rather than as a central purpose.

From work two decades ago on the Association of American Colleges and Universities' transformational "Cultural Legacies" project, I believe that humanities studies are an essential way students learn about the world's diverse societies and cultures, past and present, and the diversity of human experience, even if we do not think this reducible to easily agreed-upon syllabi and reading lists. Whether or not one prefers a historical approach to humanistic studies, it has never been more important that today's students (and citizens) reflect on differing responses through the ages to the questions about the meaning of human nature, goodness, justice, and a free society. Such inquiry also has the power to help cultivate in our students habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of the soul.

Even if universities like mine were filled with humanities majors, I would argue for a coherent general education program shaped around some intentional, integrated learning experiences. Random distribution requirements with little apparent purpose or shape serve, even if unintentionally, to marginalize the humanities. Small wonder in this all-too-common situation that faculty, like students, see humanities courses as inconvenient hurdles to get out of the way or to defer as long as possible. In contrast, colleges that make humanities study important in the first year experience, and design shared integrated-learning opportunities for their students send a powerful, impossible-to-miss message about the purpose of college.

Over two decades ago, at my first college of employment, a group of young, mostly untenured faculty led a radical redesign of general education that made humanities study central to all students' experience through paired or interdisciplinary offerings sequenced in a way that mirrored the developmental learning occurring in most majors. Disparaged by a senior faculty member as "The Humanities Mafia," all of us even today, 25 years later, consider that designation a badge of honor.

There are, of course, countless ways within higher education to highlight the humanities. Let me suggest a few from my current experience. Humanities courses with community-based learning projects link the humanities directly to issues of public concern. Cross-disciplinary, team-taught courses, especially ones linked to the faculty's research provide compelling integrative learning experiences for students. Two of my top faculty—one in theology and one in biology, have published and taught together for seven years, most recently publishing a book that originally appeared as a course title: "God, Science, and Designer Genes."

At many Catholic universities like my own, the study of philosophy is celebrated and required, along with work in theological or religious studies, including at least one course in ethics. At Alvernia, for example, besides the usual undergraduate requirements, all 800+ graduate students take *two* courses in ethics, one taught by a trained ethicist and the

other an applied course appropriate to each student's field of study. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, this emphasis on ethics and values-based, humanistic reflection is often cited by employers as part of the "Alvernia Advantage."

In an area with a famous Jazz Fest and with several colleges and universities well respected for the fine arts, Alvernia has established a Literary Festival, a Writers Series, and a lecture series entitled "Ethics, Leadership, and Community." Acclaimed historians and non-fiction writers as well as famous novelists like Richard Russo or scholars who gathered from across the globe for a conference devoted to local son, John Updike, convey by their presence the simple truth *that such work really matters*.

Equally impressive is the campus Writers Series, initiated by a young first-year faculty member, himself a professional writer. Six years later, it draws together periodically a large, diverse collection of student, faculty, and staff writers. Our university lecture series, with its focus on the ethical dimension of contemporary, often controversial, issues, fills a void in a small metropolitan community and has attracted to campus a wide-ranging sampling of the general public. It has also heightened the university's identification as a "safe space" for sometimes difficult dialogues and made us a center for interfaith programs and intercultural dialogue.

Such programs, with their refusal to settle for easy answers, serve to promote the humanities in another more fundamental way. Two responses from colleagues to my inquiries about the nature of this symposium are instructive. One of my senior philosophy colleagues, not knowing my own teaching style, insisted that given their subject matter, the method of teaching the humanities should always be Socratic—in his words, "asking questions and questioning answers."

Reading this recalled a brief essay written as a young ABD professor in my second year of full-time teaching: liberal arts education, I suggested, should cultivate in students the habits of "constructive skepticism," a process of relentless questioning that would help clarify their values and what they considered sacred. Last week, from a complementary perspective, my initial department chair and teaching mentor, an exemplar of humanistic study and the values of passionate secular humanism, provided a fitting, if unsettling, coda for my reflections today:

The Humanities seek to minister to students with restless hearts and inquiring minds. We don't seek to remedy that condition in our graduates but to deepen it through knowledge and reflection. We need to turn out more such citizens for our increasingly dysfunctional democracy.