

## **Symposium on the Future of the Humanities**

**Sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges and the Cultural Conversations  
Project of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies  
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**INTRODUCTION TO PANEL II:  
THE HUMANITIES, THE INDIVIDUAL, AND SOCIETY  
by  
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Let me start by thanking, once again, Azar and Richard for bringing us together and for the important ongoing work that is being done by the Council of Independent Colleges and the Cultural Conversations Project here at SAIS.

Our first panel set the day's agenda by exploring in broad terms the value of the humanities and their changing status. We now focus on the humanities, the individual, and society. The questions that the next three speakers were asked to address are important. But they look rhetorical, since I doubt that our panelists will dispute the premises underlying them, viz. that the humanities (to quote the printed program) can clarify fundamental conceptions of humanity, morality, freedom, civility, and imagination, that they are in fact necessary for a healthy democracy, and that they can foster continuity and cohesion in a fragmented country. Of course, if anyone wants to dispute these assertions, I would welcome that and it would certainly be a discussion I would enjoy moderating!

What is more likely, however, is that there will be such widespread agreement among us today that we will seem to be preaching to the converted. For that reason, I thought that I would pose a few additional questions that are different from those in the program. These questions may be more appropriately engaged later in the day. But they do lurk unspoken behind each of the four panels, and there may not be unanimity about their answers.

The first question is: do we actually understand what is happening in the humanities? Suspicious of the rhetoric of crisis, I tend to agree with Pauline Yu of the ACLS who recently quipped that reports of our demise are greatly exaggerated.<sup>1</sup> Of course, there are signs that the humanities are losing ground in certain quarters. But the evidence is partly anecdotal and not fully analyzed. Happily, that is changing as a result of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators project and the subsequent creation of a national commission which will make policy recommendations on the basis of the data.<sup>2</sup> Already, even before this work is done, we can see that the situation is not straightforward. A forthcoming study of declines in academic fields (not just humanities) from 1970 to 2006 by a team of sociologists at U.C.Riverside will offer a more nuanced overview.<sup>3</sup> While the English major, for example, has been dethroned by Business (in which one fifth of all undergraduates now major) and Economics (its liberal arts cousin), other humanities majors have grown—for example, foreign languages, literatures, and linguistics are up 30% between 2001 and 2008.<sup>4</sup> And in my own field, Classics, while the

closing of a department attracts attention, the opening of new programs often goes unremarked. Finally, the key metric may well turn out to be not the number of students majoring in Classics or other humanities subjects but, rather, the extent to which the humanities are infused throughout the curriculum of all students, including those in business and the other professions.

A second question, or rather set of questions, concerns not the current state of the humanities but the case that we are making today for their value and importance. Is there, in fact, hard evidence to back up our claims, or are they simply articles of faith? Next, do the humanities, as they are currently practiced, particularly in the academy, ever fall short of the claims we make for them? (I refer here to the study and teaching of the humanities, not the actual objects of our study—the useful distinction that President Knapp made in his remarks earlier today.) If so, what can we do to improve our practice, to bring it into line with our theory? Finally—and this may just be the same question phrased differently: underlying the rhetoric of crisis is the assumption that our problems are in large part the result of external factors; but to what extent are developments in the humanities themselves also responsible for their current state?

The most recent example of the external pressures we face is represented by a report of the National Governors Association, which came out earlier this month.<sup>5</sup> Arguing that higher education must focus not only on issues of access and degree completion, but also on the types of degrees that are awarded, the NGA calls for reform of “an often-hidebound system of postsecondary education” (p. 41), in which colleges and universities “...base curricula decisions on the expertise and interests of faculty, the interests of students, and other *internal* criteria” (p. 16). Instead, educational content and pedagogy, we are told, should align with market needs, and funding should be based on performance measures reflecting these needs.

The report predictably views education in transactional not transformative terms, it emphasizes global economic competitiveness, and it stresses credentialing in certain fields like nursing and information technology where, to be fair, there are serious shortfalls. On the other hand, most of the core competencies on which the governors focus are those which we associate with the liberal arts, and particularly the humanities—critical thinking and analysis, creativity, problem solving, ethics and integrity, oral and written communication skills, foreign language fluency, global awareness, and an ability to function in culturally diverse environments. It is striking how this list is not very different from the inventory of knowledge and skills that Martha Nussbaum recently endorsed in her manifesto, *Not for Profit*, in which she takes issue with narrowly vocational, market-driven forms of education while, at the same time, making the case that the sort of humanistic education we need for our own self-development and for democratic society to flourish is also good for the economy.<sup>6</sup>

I take to heart the unease expressed in the first panel this morning with low-end utilitarian arguments for the humanities. A case can be made (as we are doing today) on higher grounds. But in so far as government and business leaders inadvertently give us this

opening, should we not take it? If we want to do this—and this is something we can debate—do we have the evidence to support our claims?

At present there is great suspicion of outcomes assessment among humanists, some of whom even feel that it is part of the problem we face, not the solution. In just the past month, however, two studies have attempted to move us beyond this position. The first is the Teagle Foundation volume edited by Donna Heiland and Laura Rosenthal, *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime*, that tackles some of these objections head-on and explores ways of assessing learning at the disciplinary level.<sup>7</sup> The second is the much-discussed study, *Academically Adrift*, by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, who focus on overall (as opposed to disciplinary) learning and who show that almost half of the students in their dataset after two years of college demonstrated no improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing.<sup>8</sup>

The one bright spot in this otherwise disturbing picture is that the students who showed the most improvement were in liberal arts programs. So, it ought to be possible to build on this finding to create an even more nuanced assessment that would validate our claims, both for the humanities generally and also for specific disciplines. Unfortunately, the study also suggests that, even for liberal arts students, we can do a better job. The low levels of learning documented by the study correlate with the fact that a large percentage of the students in the dataset did not have courses in which they were assigned even 40 pages of reading a week or 20 pages of writing a semester. In other words, students learn more if we ask more of them—and of ourselves.

There is much more that we can do to make a strong, evidence-based case for the humanities; and then we can use that same evidence to improve our practice, by studying and teaching the humanities in a way that is consistent with the claims we make, with society's needs, and with our own personal aspirations.

At this point, I will turn to our three panelists. Since their biographies are in the program, I will not introduce them formally. But it would be hard to think of three individuals better suited to advance our conversation—a preeminent philosopher whose work on such topics as cosmopolitanism and morality is central to our humanistic discourse, a foremost poet and critic whose writing exemplifies the power of the arts and humanities even as the foundation he leads supports the creativity of others, and the visionary dean of a college that has made a very distinctive commitment to the liberal arts. Would you please welcome our first speaker, Anthony Appiah, who will be followed by Edward Hirsch and then by Victoria Mora?

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> American Council of Learned Societies Annual Report, 2009-10, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the Academy's projects, see Leslie Berlowitz, "The Humanities: The Case for Data," *Liberal Education* 96.1 (Winter 2010), 20-25.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Brint et al., "Declining Academic Fields in U.S. Four-Year Colleges and Universities, 1970-2006," *The Journal of Higher Education*, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> David Glenn, "Traditional Language Programs Have Declined Steadily Over Decades," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, [chronicle.com/article/Traditional-Language-Programs/126368/](http://chronicle.com/article/Traditional-Language-Programs/126368/) accessed on 2/16/11.

<sup>5</sup> Erin Sparks and Mary Jo Waits, *Degrees for What Jobs: Raising Expectations for Universities and Colleges in a Global Economy* (NGA Center for Best Practices, March 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Donna Heiland and Laura J. Rosenthal, *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime: Disciplinary Assessment* (New York: Teagle Foundation, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011).