

# Introduction: The State of the Humanities

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Are the humanities in a crisis that will ultimately transform them into something that humanists do not recognize? How do we address the concerns of humanities scholars as they watch the “business model” overtaking the humanities’ traditional focus on critical thinking, analysis, reflection, and interpretation? How have the humanities become so undervalued that the mere mention of them—among fellow faculty, students, administrators, politicians, and the general public—often elicits a scoff and an automatic dismissal of the humanities?

In this volume, *Rendezvous* examines the evolving state of the humanities in higher education in the United States (U.S.). This volume brings together 18 articles on the state of the humanities, and, as we discovered, the subject is so large that most of the articles pursue topics we had not previously considered. This diversity has led to a rich and varied collection of perspectives on the humanities.

Despite their variety, the articles cohere in that they all, to some extent, touch on questions of valuation and definition. With respect to value, Robert Proctor might observe that the humanities continue their “strangely cyclical history,” having been reduced over several decades to a state of “degeneration” or “deterioration” (87). Proctor’s words were published in 1998, and his comments apply to our own time as much as his, with contemporary humanities fields facing many of the same challenges as they did two decades ago. We agree with Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth that this decline is not one of dwindling student enrollment but due to factors such as “legitimation,” which has led to a climate of crisis or the “pervasive, sinking feeling that something is very much amiss” (10). Like Bérubé and Ruth, we

believe this climate to be worth exploring, to identify the actual causes of this sense of decline.

Still, we have no intention of establishing a rigid, cause-and-effect timeline for any deterioration of the humanities. As humanists, we have (perhaps ironically) too firm a faith in the instability and unpredictability of human relationships to propose an all-encompassing master narrative. Nevertheless, reaching back from our own time and Proctor's 1998 text, we propose that if the humanities are indeed deteriorating, we can trace this deterioration as far back as 1965, when the U.S. Congress defined the humanities in the Act establishing the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The Congressional definition is worth noting in full:

The term "humanities" includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life. (National Foundation)

In this definition, we see an interdisciplinary turn in the humanities, one in which the social sciences in particular have been allowed to colonize the humanities. We argue that this approach to the humanities has done a great deal to devalue humanities studies that are not interdisciplinary. In fact, the titles of projects recently funded by the NEH suggest that humanities projects that favor empirical data gathering and information common to the social sciences are often more likely to be selected than projects that one might think of as entirely based in the humanities, i.e., topics that are purely interpretive, analytical, critical, or speculative in philosophy, religion, literature, art, and other areas of the humanities. This interdisciplinary stance has, in part, set the stage for the current climate of a crisis of identity and purpose within the humanities. Exacerbating this internal unease is an external perception that this crisis is a crisis of privilege since this reflective self-awareness seemingly can only come about as the result of too much self-centered leisure and lack of real substance or purpose.

This dual challenge of internal unease and external skepticism fits Proctor's theory that the "deterioration of a tradition" such as the humanities "is usually due to both internal and external factors," that is, "to contradictions and weaknesses within the tradition itself, and to social, economic, and cultural changes in the society of which the tradition constitutes a part" (87). We will investigate these internal and external factors in more detail.

### Deteriorating from Within

An examination of the humanities sheds light upon the contemporary university, which is placed in the untenable position of not only defending the humanities, which are perceived as entirely subjective (and therefore not valuable), but also of downplaying those very qualities that the humanities bring to all education—a way of thinking about knowledge and a way of understanding how that knowledge interacts with tradition and the creative imagination. The current state of the humanities is also the state of the university.

Even at teaching-intensive institutions, it seems that as more humanities scholars specialize in narrow yet interdisciplinary fields (e.g., literature and law or philosophy and folklore), the primary and original creative texts become less important to analyze than the facts and data surrounding the author's life and times as well as the secondary material published on the artist. Catherine Belsey notes that in these endeavors, if we start “from the cultural implications” of a given text, “we might take quite a long time to get to” the text itself; Belsey contends that “the text *itself* poses the questions” for scholarship “and not the other way round” (172). And yet, those of us who specialize in interpretation of text have found that “the other way round” increasingly dominates our fields. Here we can see that the interdisciplinary represents a double-edged sword. As long as the humanities contribute to the discussion as an independent and equal entity, such a combination offers great possibilities for development and growth, but also for the opposite, in part because the value system that underlies the university as an institution privileges the more utilitarian social sciences over the humanities.

The interdisciplinary push to change the humanities to be more like the social sciences is affecting the value placed on the humanities, including whether humanities studies are perceived as useful economically and in other ways.

For example, the study of the humanities must be rigorous and methodical, and those imaginative elements that characterize the humanities must be subjected to intense scrutiny. Is it right for traditional humanities majors to be reduced or eliminated to meet the needs of a growing body of students who desire vocational training, but who also may not want the rigorous core courses associated with a humanities education? Humanities disciplines such as languages and literatures must suddenly ally themselves with vocational programs and, in doing so, remove all elements of language as humanistic, critical, and cultural study, and transform them into something called simply “medical French” or “Spanish for engineers,” viewed as the trend of the future by administrators, but viewed as deeply troubling by colleagues who see the disappearance of language as humanistic art. It is not a question of whether such degrees should exist and be made available to students; it is a question of whether or not such programs belong in a humanities department where they draw upon the resources of traditional

majors and work somewhat at cross purposes at a time when the humanities are being systematically removed from the curriculum across the nation.

Another site where the tension between the interpretive and the empirical manifests itself is in humanities scholarship. Critical to humanistic inquiry is a sound grasp of the methodologies or “perspectives” scholars bring to their work and their ability to apply the methods through which they conduct this work (Griffin 6). In the humanities, developing mastery of methods and methodologies is tricky because, as Gabriele Griffin explains, scholars in the humanities are often “in- or possibly non-articulate” about these matters, viewing them as a “necessary evil” or something that just cannot be taught (1).

Griffin is correct that these misperceptions persist. Humanities methods are rigorous and highly specialized, which could be one reason why they are not easily articulated. We would add that further problems ensue when humanities departments become the institutional homes of those whose methods are more explicitly and narrowly defined. For these researchers, humanities methodologies and methods are mystifying. As Belsey explains, in the humanities, meaning “never appears in itself, as pure intelligibility, as idea” (167). Inquiry in the humanities relies on interpretation, analysis, and speculation and, thus, according to Belsey, “no one true meaning can ever come to light. Although it remains an object of desire in all intellectual endeavor, the definitive truth is not available—now or at any time”; Belsey adds that “the one proper meaning, the reading that would guarantee closure, is not an option” (176).

For Belsey, interpretation, analysis, and speculation are endless, and in this she rejoices. However, Belsey—and we—are aware that not everyone shares our joy. Encountering scholarship that generates no data, relies on no control group, and produces no generalizable answers to any research questions can be frustrating to those outside the humanities. Moreover, not only do the humanities not generate data as fields outside the humanities understand it, but scholars in the humanities do not *wish* to generate data, which many humanists view as spurious. These differences between an interpretive and empirical stance are not a problem when the humanities have disciplinary boundaries—departments and programs where they can practice their scholarship in peace. However, as the 1965 Congressional definition demonstrates, these boundaries have become blurred. In many humanities departments, humanists and social scientists now work side by side. When social scientists assume institutional positions where their power over the humanities outstrips their knowledge of the humanities, the results only undermine the humanities further.

For the humanities to prosper, there must be a community of humanities scholars who can rely on one another and participate in a continuing dialogue of growth and creative development. As humanities scholar Carl Levenson points out:

Humanities dialogue doesn't happen on committees. Nor does it thrive through data crunching. If ideas are feebly constructed and met with the accumulation of a great deal of data, then the data simply accrues beyond a

point in which it is manageable and significant. The deep structures—which generate the data—recede more and more. Ideas are the focal point of all disciplines and are exactly why the humanities might be seen as the foundation of everything. (personal communication, April 8, 2017)

Scholarly creativity thrives in a community's exchange of ideas, and we see individual and disciplinary growth through this creative exchange of ideas. The development of the humanities involves collaboration, which, as humanists are aware, is based upon the Socratic method of question and answer, in short, a dialogue. Unfortunately, in the current climate of what has been referred to as "social Darwinism," with the social sciences and humanities competing for scant resources, we see more and more often distrust and reclusiveness within the academic scholarly community as its members embody what they have accepted as the natural order of the survival of the fittest, and, following from that, academics benefitting at the expense of colleagues is seen as "winning." In this environment, there can be no trust and certainly no dialogue nor collaboration. It is the quintessential example of the ends justifying the means, in which all behavior becomes acceptable within the context of an end result. Regrettably, this approach does not result in the cultivation of inner integrity, which is the great truth and creative impetus that the study of the humanities represents: the pure enjoyment and sharing of ideas for their own sake, and not for the kind of worldly gain they may bring.

### **The View from Outside**

To some extent, the conflict between the interpretive and the empirical has been imposed upon humanities disciplines from the outside. Congressional definitions and NEH funding practices are a key factor. At the NEH, funding for the humanities and funding for the social sciences are lumped together, and in the competition for funding in the current anti-humanities context, the humanities suffer. It is almost a misnomer to term humanities funding as funding for the humanities when, in fact, the humanities-oriented social sciences are often given priority in funding.

The challenges that the humanities face are not confined to national funding practices but affect the humanities in other areas outside of academia. Humanities disciplines are seen as just plain "not relevant," and their lowly status is reflected in state funding cuts and top-down campus reorganizations that reduce or eliminate humanities courses and majors. In this respect, the business model describes not only attempts to manage educational institutions as business enterprises but also assumptions that higher education exists to train the workforce of the future. No one can blame students for making use of higher education to prepare for employment. They, their instructors, and schools are merely responding to an education-employment model in place now for decades. We do wonder why business has not taken it on itself to train its own employees but perhaps it is easier to outsource this massive enterprise to colleges and universities, all the while putting the costs

increasingly on students in the form of debt they then carry into their working lives. In this model, humanities disciplines that do not clearly lead to a specific career or job inevitably come to be seen as irrelevant, at least to the millions who regard higher education as the pathway to employment.

These reductions in humanities courses and programs are occurring even though it is the humanities that continue to offer solutions to problems that confront our world, specifically valuable to students seeking preparation for the responsibilities of citizenship, a calling or vocation (as opposed to job training), and the tools needed to support life-long learning. Martha Nussbaum highlights the "huge pedagogical and practical benefits" of the humanities when she states that an education grounded in the humanities "recognizes that higher education prepares students in two distinct ways: for a career, but also for citizenship and life" (149). Similarly, Lyn Maxwell White offers an eloquent defense, stating that the humanities

can help us face the tension between the concerns of individuals and those of groups and promote civil and informed discussion of conflicts, placing current issues in historical perspective. They also give voice to feeling and artistic shape to experience, balancing passion and rationality and exploring issues of morality and value. The study of the humanities provides a venue in which the expression of differing interpretations and experiences can be recognized and areas of common interest explored. (263)

Given the humanities' focus on "civil and informed discussion," reductions in humanities education risk undermining principles of democracy, not just for instructors and students but for all. Within academic contexts, these reductions especially threaten academic freedom.

Academic freedom is regularly called into question as a guaranteed right of faculty, students, and other members of the academic community. In defining academic freedom, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) focuses, perhaps understandably, on the rights of faculty. Nevertheless, as the AAUP states in its landmark "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure": "Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good. . . . The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition" (14). In other words, academic freedom is meant to benefit not just the individual faculty member or student, but society as a whole. In this, academic freedom can be linked to the fundamental principles of American democracy, most notably the rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights, which clearly benefit the individual but also serve to create a civil and free society. For this reason, it is interesting to explore the parallels between the lack of appreciation for humanities studies and the lack of appreciation for its corollary, academic freedom.

The gradual yet persistent chipping away of the humanities is similar to the chipping away of academic freedom in that both involve a kind of overt or covert censorship. Overt censorship takes place when humanities programs

are cut (thus removing or silencing the humanities as a voice on campus) or academic freedom rights are attacked or ignored by administrators, politicians, and other authorities. Covert censorship occurs when faculty, students, and other members of the academy are encouraged to self-censor, whether this censorship occurs through a self-imposed individual silencing or voluntary elimination of humanities programs, especially those deemed controversial or politically incorrect.

Further censorship occurs when academic freedom is curtailed through a manipulation of the words through which academics describe their work. For example, the AAUP links academic freedom to the use of “collegiality” as a metric for evaluating colleagues:

collegiality is not a distinct capacity to be assessed independently of the traditional triumvirate of teaching, scholarship, and service. . . . The current tendency to isolate collegiality as a distinct dimension of evaluation, however, poses several dangers. Historically, “collegiality” has not infrequently been associated with ensuring homogeneity and hence with practices that exclude persons on the basis of their difference from a perceived norm. The invocation of “collegiality” may also threaten academic freedom. (“On Collegiality”)

For the AAUP, “collegiality” is really a code word for an attempt to homogenize a department, college, or university—a critical matter for humanities programs beset by pressures to provide vocational training, become more interdisciplinary, or streamline their curricula to suit administrative fads. The AAUP adds that, in these situations, a “faculty member’s right to dissent” becomes misrepresented as lack of enthusiasm, dedication, or the kind of “constructive attitude” that can “foster harmony” (“On Collegiality”). The result is, once again, overt censorship—here, by colleagues or administrators who use collegiality to silence those who disagree with their decisions—or covert censorship, in this case, by faculty members who silence themselves rather than risk the charge of being uncollegial. This silencing of dissent endangers all academic fields but especially the humanities, whose survival may depend on humanists’ ability to dissent from enthusiastic attempts to transform their disciplines into something they are not.

## Conclusion

It is our hope that this volume will spark reflection and discussion on both the current state of the humanities and their future in American higher education. We hope that scholars in the humanities will not view themselves primarily through the lens of decline or crisis, or from the perspective that they must justify their study of the humanities, but rather from an understanding that the humanities are their own justification. Through the

exercise of what humanities scholars do best, which is a combination of constant theorizing, intrinsic problem-solving, and the use of the creative imagination, the humanities can rely on their internal strengths and insist on defining their own identity, moving away from definitions that rise out of funding agency priorities or workplace needs that force the humanities to be something other than what they are. We would like to see a humanities-oriented tradition and dialogic imagination that is aware of important information and data, but which does not privilege data collection and disconnected information over the humanities and their instinctive ability to foster insight, knowledge, and understanding. Humanities scholars need to lead the way in applying the humanities to questions and problems that the humanities are ideally suited to address. With that, we invite the audience of *Rendezvous* to participate in this process by reading the articles in this volume. The authors of these articles comment in their own way on the state of the humanities, and we are grateful for their varied and, quite often, optimistic perspectives on the humanities.

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