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The Future of the Humanities and
Liberal Arts in a Global Age

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I. Introduction: Identifying the Issue

What all college and university graduates are expected to share is a contentious and potentially divisive question. While most administrators recognize the need to graduate students well equipped to adapt to the market's demands – graduates who can easily “get a job” – most disagree on what a “well educated” graduate is or should be. Once looking to cultivate a “responsible human being and citizen” and certain “traits of mind and ways of looking at man and the world,” the goal of 21st higher education is becoming increasingly elusive.¹

What is not so unclear is that the social and natural based science majors are in; studies in the humanities and liberal arts are out. Why exactly? Some scholars point to the recent shift to profit-orientated programming as a point of reorganization by the colleges and universities themselves. In order to integrate with the new global and technologically advanced economy, some colleges and universities are beginning to favor the more practical vocational disciplines over and above the less “useful” but more “liberal” or humanistic ones. Colleges and universities are no less immune to the market sharing, competition, and capitalistic investing that “drives” civic and global corporations. As a result, many administrators, parents, and students now consider humanities and liberal arts majors to be literally “worth” less.

Other scholars point to the tendency to treat cultural pluralism or multiculturalism as *pedagogically essential* to humanities curricula as reason for their decline.² The belief that what graduates need are not shared values of a national people but rather the toleration of different and often opposing values of a diverse or “multicultural” people has caused a great number of

¹ This is at least according to the Harvard University Report, *General Education in a Free Society* (1945).

² Among them, Anthony Kronman advances this thesis in his recent book, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

colleges and universities to disavow assumptions about the values of the West and dispense with those courses that traditionally expose students to them. But whether the majority of American humanities and liberal arts courses should always embody and convey distinctively Western values and ideals is an open and rather “touchy” subject. Whatever the ultimate reasons for the recent shift in university programming may be, evidence of the humanities and liberal arts’ unpopularity is not lacking.

In a 2009 *New York Times* article, columnist Patricia Cohen points to a December 2008 survey of 200 higher education institutions by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and Moody’s Investors Services finding that 10 percent of the surveyed institutions have imposed a total hiring freeze in the humanities, and an additional 43 percent have imposed a partial freeze.³ In the last two years, no fewer than one hundred colleges and/or universities have canceled or postponed faculty searches in religion, ethics, history, philosophy, and the classics.

The latest jobs report from the Modern Language Association indicates that listings in English, literature and foreign languages dropped 45 percent in just the past two years, the biggest decline in 34 years. Listings in the social and natural sciences were up by nearly the same amount. According to *The Humanities Indicators*, the humanities’ share of post secondary degrees is less than half of what it was during the middle of the 20th century. Humanities and liberal arts majors account for about 8 percent (110,000 students), compared with 17.8 percent of students in the 1960s; of the current 8 percent, the majority of students graduate from elite private schools. In light of rising tuition costs, market trends, and the demand for high salaried jobs, it is apparent that an increasing amount of students and university administrators fear humanities and liberal arts degrees are simply not worth the price tag.

³ Patricia Cohen, “In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth” *New York Times*, February 25, 2009.

Recently, the State University of New York at Albany announced that it was ending all enrollments to programs in French, Italian, and Russian classics. Albany administrators cited long-term state cutbacks in public funding and a lack of student interest as the main reasons for the “reorganization.” And while Albany’s president, George M. Phillip, said that this “action does not reflect the quality of . . . value these subjects [have] to the liberal arts,” just what value humanities and liberal arts courses have to the undergraduate life is less clear.

With an economy mired in deficits and high unemployment rates, individual state and federal budget cutting is not sparing education – especially a liberal arts one. Changes in institutional programming reflect changes in governmental and/or market priorities. This much is clear. Many corporations in the “new global economy” now require well-educated workers in business and technology related areas to create and protect knowledge-based products, processes, and services.⁴ The combination of these factors has forced a great many public liberal arts colleges and universities to follow Albany’s suit, now cutting the “non-essentials” and reorganizing their own programming in order to offer more business, finance, and economics courses.⁵ This shift in emphasis and funding is potentially ruinous for humanities programming in 21st century higher education.

⁴ The “new global economy” refers to the increasingly integrated and interdependent economic world. In the opinion of Shelia Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, it treats knowledge as raw material that can be “claimed, owned, and marketed as products or services” and emphasizes a need for technologically and/or economically well educated workers and consumers. *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). These authors are the ones that point to the “internal embeddedness” of profit-orientated programming as “a point of reorganization” by colleges and universities to market products created by faculty and “develop commercializable products outside of conventional academic structures and individual faculty members” (11). See also Stanley N. Katz, “Liberal Education on the Ropes,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 1, 2005 and Richard Byrne, “A Crisis in Academic Publishing Gives Way to a Crisis in the Humanities,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 15, 2005.

⁵ Clifford Adelman, *The New College Course Map and Transcript Files: Changes in Course-taking and Achievement, 1972-1993*. 2nd edition. National Institute on Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Washington, DC: US Department of Education).

In such a climate, the rise of opportunistic trade schools and two-year colleges across the country is unsurprising. Revenue at for-profit technical and trade schools has jumped over 15% percent over the past 2 years, compared to average growth between 5% and 6% in 2006 and 2007, according to the financial analysis firm Sageworks. Quite simply, statistics show students and parents are now focused on educational value, with a specific eye toward the applicability (read also: profitability) of academic programs. These new vocational schools offer quick online certification in practical skills, sans the frills and “excessive” costs of humanities electives.

The shift in emphasis and academic priorities is also evidenced by the federal government’s support of research and development programs, 96 percent of which is concentrated in science, technology, engineering, and medical fields. According to Slaughter and Cantwell, the social sciences experienced the largest decrease of any fields in share of research and development funds over the past three decades, dropping by more than half from 7.5 percent in 1975 to 3.6 percent in 2006.

Overall, public and political interest in the humanities is clearly on the wane and attempts at stemming the decline are many. How should those most concerned with the survival of the humanities and liberal arts help justify their worth? What strategies should they employ in order to be of any “value” to both students and citizens in the 21st century? Answers are many and vary greatly. Some humanists argue that the education they provide is consistently becoming restricted to just the elite who are rich in capital – cultural and otherwise. As a result, humanities and liberal arts programming in public, less prestigious but more populated postsecondary institutions must be increased in order to offset educational inequities. The fact that humanities and liberal arts courses continue to thrive in elite liberal arts schools widens the divide between a well-educated aristocratic class and a more technically proficient but less “liberally” educated

working class. Exacerbating the divide, these scholars conclude, contributes to the gradual attrition of democracy through the rise of *faction* populism. And whether it derives from the right or the left, such inequities may just be another midwife for demagoguery.

Martha Nussbaum has recently argued along similar lines. She observes that the humanities have been central to higher education because they have rightly been seen as essential for creating competent democratic citizens.⁶ But recently, the goal of higher education has gone disturbingly awry. Focused on productivity and economic growth, Nussbaum argues that both American and European universities treat education as though its primary goal were to teach students how to be economically productive rather than to think critically, liberally, and become knowledgeable, moral and “empathetic citizens.” The loss of these basic capacities together with exposure to traditional Western classics jeopardizes the health of democracies and the hope of a decent world.

Other humanists argue along more political lines. They claim that the educational divide serves to reinforce the unhealthy if not “malignant polarization of society,” frustrating public deliberation.⁷ Having *only* a well-educated elite class of citizens predetermines socio-economical placement and aids in the corporate monopolization of the public policy agenda. The separation may also prevent the majority of a nation’s citizenry from understanding the ideological underpinnings of their own way of life. But again, whether exposure to American or Western values and ideals is essential for the survival of the body politic is (at least of late) an unsettled question. The difficulties the humanities and liberal arts are encountering in higher education may not be unrelated to this uncertainty. If no unity of outlook is required to establish

⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁷ An observation recently made by Ellen Schrecker, in “Unegalitarian Assumptions” *New York Times*, October 17, 2010.

a rule of law, then what good are those courses that typically engender common assent to certain principles of living lawfully?

In partial response to the ascending unpopularity of humanities programming, the unegalitarian structure of post-secondary school education, as well as the gradual attrition of college graduates conversant in American history, literature, and philosophy, members of the United States Congress recently reemphasized the importance of exposing all citizens to *what* the humanities and liberal arts teach. Congress not only found and declared that these disciplines “belong to all people of the United States,” and that their preservation is an “appropriate matter” of concern to the federal government, but also that any advanced civilization must not “limit” its scholarship to science and technology alone. The government must give “full value and support” to the humanities and liberal arts.

Congressional members also declared that the American democracy demands “wisdom and vision in its citizens” – citizens who should not be “unthinking servants” of technology. The humanities are those courses that help “achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.” For this reason, Congress concluded, the Federal Government must “compliment, assist, and add programs” for the advancement of the humanities and liberal arts.⁸ But what influence – monetary and otherwise – this particular Congressional title has had on college and university humanities’ programming is, frankly, less than desired.

In a recent lecture on the mission of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), Chairman Jim Leach echoed Congress’ declarations. Chairman Leach argued that a refusal to learn lessons about the human condition by a study of the humanities, and/or the refusal to think through philosophical and ethical quandaries of the day vis-à-vis the literary works of traditional

⁸ United States Code, Title 20, Chapter 26, Subchapter I, Section 951

humanities courses, are not only invitations to “magnify the misjudgments of contemporaries and repeat the mistakes of others in the near and ancient past” but also formulas for American economic and cultural decay.⁹

While the NEH is very often charged with “preserving” the humanities in American culture, however, it is only meant to be an “incubator of thought” in them, Leach insists, not an authoritative legislative body or federal entity whose exclusive mission is to fund college and university undergraduate humanities’ programming.¹⁰ For this reason, Congressional action insisting on curriculum reform may not be without merit. The question becomes: Given its recent declaration on the importance of the humanities for American society, how extensive (if at all?) ought the Federal or a local state government’s support of humanities courses and programming in colleges and universities be?

The purpose of this paper primarily intends to shed light on the nature of the current state of the humanities and liberal arts in American higher education. It also hopes to aid in the reestablishment of their importance as indispensable intellectual resources for a well-ordered, functioning, and/or successful democracy (successful, that is, not merely as a system of government but, as any democracy must be, in part as a spiritual ideal).¹¹

The paper will first discuss the humanities’ role in the global age. Faced not only with an increasingly economically integrated world but also a nation that is becoming more and more

⁹ “Humanities and the Role of the NEH” a lecture by Jim Leach given September 25, 2009, Washington DC.

¹⁰ Ibid. Promisingly, however, the National Humanities Alliance continues to lobby Congress for significant increases to the NEH budget. Their current proposal to Congress calls for \$60 million to stimulate new teaching positions for recent doctoral graduates entering the workforce. Specifically, it seeks funding for “at least 200 two-year fellowships awarded per year (beginning 2010) to generate 400 temporary, two-year faculty positions over a three-year period (800 FTEs).” The NHA estimates a shortage of 1000 jobs per year for humanities PhDs entering the academic workforce through 2013 (<http://www.nhalliance.org/news/humanities-enjoy-strong-student-demand-but-declini.shtml>).

¹¹ A point well made by Harry R. Lewis in *Excellence without a Soul* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

culturally diverse, what strategies could the humanities employ to be of any real value to either? What significance are they to the STEM disciplines and what can the humanities' subject matter contribute to the natural sciences? Secondly, the paper will detail the degree to which the humanities and liberal arts are in a "crisis" state. Just what *is* the problem? Can we articulate the mounting opposition to humanities and liberal arts programming without adopting a "critical" or incendiary narrative? The paper will then attempt to expose some of the causes of the decline. Finally, the paper will call attention to the immediate need for further Congressional and local State action in order to ensure that humanities courses and programs continue to be of real value to students and citizens across the country.

II. The Humanities in a Global Age: Identity and Purpose

In 1903, in response to the plight of the African American worker, W. E. B. Du Bois spoke eloquently of the danger associated with widening the educational divide between the elite and a nation's working class. Many at the time wanted to refuse African Americans an education in the humanities and liberal arts, and in speaking out such segregation, Du Bois provides his own understanding of what a general or liberal arts education is or should be. His thoughts are remarkably apropos and worth quoting in full:

We are training not isolated men but a living group of men, - nay, a group within a group. The final product of an education must neither be a psychologist nor a bricks mason, but a man. And to make men, we must have Ideals, broad, pure, and inspiring ends of living, - not sordid money-getting, not apples of gold. The worker must work for the glory of his handiwork, not simply for pay; the thinker must think for truth, not for fame. And all this is gained only by human strife and longing; by ceaseless training and education; by founding Right on righteousness and Truth on the unhampered search for Truth; by founding the common school on the university, and the industrial school on the common school; and weaving thus a system, not a distortion, and bringing a birth, not an abortion.¹²

¹² W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapter V, 1903.

Du Bois' point is twofold. The goal of an education is not merely the learning of certain skill sets but also the transmission of the kind of knowledge necessary to form good character. It is, as he says earlier, not simply to teach "bread-winning" to a select few, "furnish teachers for public schools, or even to be a centre of polite society." Rather, the goal of an education is "to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization."¹³

In Du Bois' view, education is not education in knowledge in general, whatever that may be. Nor is it simply the response to market forces. As Harvard University's 1945 *General Education in a Free Society* report observed, the goal of education is to help form a "responsible human being and citizen," and to "include at each level of maturity some continuing contact with those fields in which value judgments are of prime importance." Presumably, education also includes teaching the intellectual and moral virtues, helping students to discriminate between those values and ideas worthy of pursuit and assent.

As Plato some time ago remarked, education does not involve "listening to any stories that anyone happens to make up" or "ideas often the very opposite to those [children] ought to have when they grow up. . ." ¹⁴ Rather, a general education founds "right on righteousness" and "truth on the unhampered pursuit of truth." And in the case of a democratic society, it presupposes reading certain books conveying certain ideas – ideas consonant with the ideological underpinnings of the body politic.

This understanding of education is a traditional one to be sure, but many contemporary educators continue to attempt to justify the humanities and liberal arts' worth on exactly this basis. These humanists argue that traditional humanities courses best *re-present* those values and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic*.

ideals essential to maintaining the conditions necessary for the practice of justice, the exercise of freedom, and the propagation of civic virtue. Exposure to *what* they teach brings students and citizens into the “conversation” of the opportunities and future prospects of human freedom and their origins.¹⁵ They are, in short, the “organ of that fine adjustment” between real life and the knowledge of it.

Contemporary philosopher and author Martha Nussbaum has written eloquently about how the humanities convey “abilities for citizenship” such as critical thinking, cultural literacy, and narrative imagination. These abilities, she contends, promote ideal human fulfillment and encourage responsible engagement in democratic civic life and the global economy.¹⁶ The humanities create these opportunities because they allow each citizen to engage in the literary and philosophical foundations of our society. Thus, nothing short of a vigorous *reassertion* of a common narrative or canon is required.

But in his meditation on American public life Martin Marty reminds us that we are not *one* people but a plurality of peoples, each espousing and advancing its own creed in light of its own history.¹⁷ Finding a “common narrative” or fixed “conversation” acceptable to all peoples is self-defeating in Marty’s view. Civil institutions as well as federal entities ought to eschew all value judgments on the assumption that it is not the business of these bodies to endorse or

¹⁵ Typically attributed to Michael Oakeshott, the idea of entering the “Great Conversation” insists on a common conversation of the opportunities and future prospects of human freedom and their origins. Thus, the humanities should include those books that have helped shape Western Civilization. Because life is short, Oakeshott argues, it is impossible for any individual or group to usher in an ideally “free” society. Instead, much of life has to be spent in learning a culture’s existing patterns of behavior and traditions, then making wise decisions based on these traditions. Traditions that enhance individual liberty, trial by jury, voluntary associations, religious freedom, and so forth—should be encouraged, while those that inhibit the human spirit should be discarded. Cf. *On Human Conduct* (Clarendon Press, 1975).

¹⁶ Martha Nussbaum, “Education for Profit, Education for Freedom,” *Liberal Education* 95, 3 (Summer 2009), 6-13.

¹⁷ Martin Marty, *The One and the Many* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

advance one identity or conception of the good over another. Thus, articulating and settling on a “fixed” “conversation” – whose intellectual sources *would* be the content of humanities courses – amounts to an unjustified prejudice. If Marty is correct, exactly *what* the humanities are able offer to contemporary students and citizens – at least in a democratic society – appears to be less significant and consequently much harder to justify.

In his recent book, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, Kronman makes a compelling case in favor of the humanities on precisely the grounds Marty rejects. Kronman argues that the humanities used to give young people the opportunity and encouragement to put themselves – their values and commitments – into “a critical perspective,” precisely because they exposed students to a “stable repertoire of values” that constituted a “recurrent framework of choice” for each generation.¹⁸ This “framework” is the shared body of knowledge or traditional canon of Western history. Without it, our ability to make – or demand from others – logical, informed decisions about managing our free democratic society is arguably made more difficult if not impossible.

Chairman Jim Leach has argued along similar and possibly more contentious lines. He observes that the academy has an obligation to take notice and to lead in helping “re-instill our political system with greater depth of historical and philosophical perspective.”¹⁹ While respecting both conservative and liberal concerns, he maintains, academics must emend speech which is “beyond the pale of historical reasoning or traditional American values” while “preserving” the foundations of Western civilization.²⁰

¹⁸ Anthony Kronman, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 118.

¹⁹ Jim Leach, “Jurisprudence and the Humanities” given at the *American Council of Learned Societies*, May 7th 2010. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).

²⁰ Ibid.

Leach's argument is the belief that the best condition for learning about other cultures is first understanding one's own; and for this reason, it makes sense for Western colleges and universities to begin with and place at their core the "Great Conversation" which constitutes the civilization of which they are already a part.²¹ In like manner, Kronman concludes to the fact that because Western values and ideals have become the "common possession" of all of humanity, those specific books conveying these normative principles of behavior and freedom – or at least those seminal works that gave rise to them – should be at the center of higher education programming and curricula.²²

In a "global age" employing this particular strategy is becoming increasingly less convincing, however. Most colleges and universities are expanding beyond their own cultural and ideological preoccupations – no longer recognizing the responsibility to see that its students understand the foundations of their own government or to be exposed to the ideals, values, or "ends" embodied in Western institutions. It may no longer be the case that understanding the

²¹ An observation made by Peter Berkowitz, of the Hoover Institution, in review of Kronman's book. "What is University For" in *Policy Review* (December 2007).

²² "The accepting of [Western ideals] is the hallmark of modernization, which is in turn the defining feature of globalization, and all of them, all of these distinctively modern ideas and institutions, are of Western origin. Globalization is modernization, and modernization is Westernization" (Ibid.). Most American institutions of higher education appear to lack a coherent if definitive understanding of what Western Identity or Civilization is. As a result, Kronman observes, the colleges and universities providing any authoritative guidance in the foundations of Western thought are only religious ones. Faced with the increasing threat of radical fundamentalism, on all fronts, the imperative that all American colleges and universities must return to an authoritative (non-sectarian) survey of "Western roots" has never been so strong. In his recent work on religion and religious violence, William Cavanaugh concludes to the fact that because there is no coherent way to separate a universal essence of religion from that of politics, radical fundamentalism must be understood as a "theopolitical" project. But this cannot be done unless one is educated in the traditions of one's own civilization, e.g., the intellectual, moral, and political history of the Western world. Cf. *The Myth of Religious Violence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Anthony Kronman goes as far to argue that not only has the devaluation of the humanities and liberal arts severed the connection to what it means to be a human being, but it has also caused a "dangerous and damaging contraction of intellectual and spiritual possibilities with the culture at large by leaving the question of life's meaning in the nearly exclusive possession of those with fundamentalist beliefs."

“intangible” and inalienable truths – or at least the philosophical arguments that gave rise to them – is required for a well-functioning democracy or living a global citizenship.

Regardless, the argument that the humanities and liberal arts will always allow students to acquire more mind, more critical thought and more awareness about themselves, about their situation, its possibilities, and its depth and purpose – regardless of what texts comprise their courses – merits serious consideration. While the humanities’ subject-matter may indeed be one’s culture, why they must always adhere to a “fixed” literary “conversation” is less than evident.

Consequently, a number of other humanists have argued that the purpose of humanities courses – and ostensibly the goal of higher education – is not to help align students to a particular worldview, but rather to help them take the “situation” or the whole within which they act and examine and/or reflect on it . . . whatever that may happen to be.²³ Endeavoring to critically reflect on our current state of affairs is of inestimable value regardless of career choice and regardless of cultural, political, and/or religious prejudice. The humanities and liberal arts foster a *willingness* to consider seeing the whole or the given from another perspective, especially difficult at times given the way we depend on facts and figures, the virtuosi of our knowledge, memory, authority and arrogance. The humanities nevertheless necessarily includes an affinity for suspending what we know in order to imagine what is quite literally and physically beyond our experience, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender and so on.

One such interesting and relatively novel way these distinctively humanistic skills are being applied is in the areas of geography, archeology and biology. The project is an attempted

²³ “Since everything human beings do is mediated by culture – by language, by representations, by systems of values and beliefs . . .” knowing how to understand other languages, interpret cultural expressions, “. . . and evaluate belief systems is as indispensable to functioning effectively in the professional world as knowing how to use a computer.” Louis Menand, “The Point of Education” *New York Times*, October 17, 2010).

synthesis of geography (now renamed Geographic Information Science, or GIS) and history. In a recent essay on the topic, Edward Ayers, historian and president of the University of Richmond, observes that “GIS is about patterns and structures; history is about motion; by integrating the two, we can see layers of events, layers of the consequences of unpredictability.”²⁴ The idea is that geography has always been an interpretive art. It requires someone who is not only an archeologist, geologist and/or geographer, but also a reader who is attentive to the development of culture, language, history, and the ways in which these “ways of living” affect the earth.

In a recent *New York Times* article, Stanley Fish also observes that in addition to GeoHumanities we now have the development of the BioHumanities.²⁵ Fish says that the humanities not only comment on the meaning or value of biological knowledge, but add to the scientist’s understanding of biology itself. For instance, the history of genetics and the philosophical work on the concept of the gene not only describe how scientists reached their current theories but deepen the understanding of those theories and of genetics itself. It does so through comparing and contrasting them to the alternatives which they displaced. Fish also alludes to the ascendancy of other integrated humanities fields, observing that

Disability Studies (of which the X-Men films might be both a representation and an instance), Metahistory (the study of the irreducibly narrative basis of historical ‘fact’), Law and Literature (the laying bare of the rhetorical and literary strategies giving form to every assertion in the law), Cultural Anthropology (an inquiry into the very possibility of anthropological observation that begins by acknowledging the inescapability of perspective and the ubiquity of interpretation), Cultural Sociology (‘the commitment to hermeneutically reconstructing social texts in a rich and persuasive way’ — Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith), and other hybrids already emergent and soon to emerge.

²⁴ cf. *GeoHumanities Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*, edited by Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, et al (Routledge, 2011).

²⁵ Stanley Fish, “The Triumph of the Humanities” *New York Times* (June 13, 2011).

In the end, then, there exists a strong consensus among all humanists that culture, with language and its many nuances as well as with its philosophical and religious flavor, is the context within which the more “practical” disciplines are “applied” and thrive. And while in Aristotle’s day the freedom to reflect was rigidly restricted to the ruling classes, this is one strong strain of the humanities and liberal arts that suggests that the pursuit of knowledge ought not be the privileged pastime of the tenured few or ignored by the technically well trained masses, but the effective means of really “liberating” everyone literary critics, biologists, engineers, et alia alike – from ill-considered prejudice, from superstitious ignorance, or, appropriate to our own age, from the onslaught of misinformation, and partisan vitriol . . . and among a great many other things.

For these, and many other reasons, therefore, the humanities and liberal arts courses can legitimately promote development of the aesthetic and analytical abilities required for advanced degrees and encourage the type of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary thinking our increasingly global world demands.²⁶ Despite what texts they may employ, the humanities offer both students and citizens alike unique access to the multiform ways in which women and men have explored and expressed their intellectual and emotional experiences over many centuries. And while the humanities do not claim to solve problems or address political or economic upheavals, they do permit society (and now apparently scientists) to learn from the shared humanness and experiences that unite us across distance and time.²⁷

III. The “Crisis”

²⁶ As many scholars have observed, the process of Globalization does not necessarily result in the dissolution or amalgamation of individual cultures or identities but rather their proliferation. Cf. for instance Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996). See also Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The illusion of Destiny* (New York: Norton, 2006).

²⁷ Peter Conn, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 4th 2010

In a recent article on the humanities and the liberal arts in higher education, James Mulholland argued that the word “crisis” should be avoided in describing the current devaluation of the humanities.²⁸ Instead, Mulholland suggests that professors of humanities change their vocabulary and attitude and offer a more cogent reassessment of what the humanities are, what the humanities do, and why the humanities deserve to be maintained and expanded within colleges and universities. On Mulholland’s score, the “crisis narrative” is incomplete and ultimately disables others from understanding humanities professors’ real concerns and objectives.

Insofar as Mulholland’s intention is to change humanities’ intellectual conversations so as to better compete with other university programs he is correct. Energies engendering paranoia are of no help in justifying the humanities’ worth. Rather, humanities professors must be more aggressive in better articulating the nature and value of their respective courses to administrators and legislators. By the same token, however, the rather “critical” state the humanities find themselves in cannot be ignored. As money tightens and careerism thrives, the content of the humanities and liberal arts curricula may, in fact, increasingly return to being only the province of the elite.

How, then, should humanists draw attention to the *marked* “decline” of their programming and course offerings in higher education? More importantly, how do humanists make the case that colleges and universities should have a civic duty to adequately cultivate “abilities of citizenship” in their students, and that these abilities are best engendered by what the humanities and liberal arts courses teach? What can humanists say about the connections

²⁸ James Mulholland, “It’s Time to Stop Mourning the Humanities” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June, 2010).

between cultural understanding and empathy on the one hand, and the technologically and economically driven careers within a rapidly changing global economy on the other?

In a report by The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Alan Brinkley of Columbia University details the dearth of university and college humanities' program funding at the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as the "decline of humanities and liberal arts" academic programming across the country.²⁹ He first observes that the majority of NEH grants were disbursed to state and local humanities agencies for public programs at museums, historical societies, libraries, and local civic centers and not to humanistic scholarship, research, and faculty hiring. Brinkley goes on to indicate that the historic gulf between funding for science, engineering, and some social sciences and humanities is neither new nor surprising but rapidly widening.

The most vivid evidence of this gulf is the decline in funding provided by the NEH. "Even at the best of times for the NEH," he says, "the difference between its funding and that of the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation has been vast." When adjusted for inflation, today's NEH budget is roughly a third of what it was 30 years ago. Budgetary pressures notwithstanding, funding for humanities scholarship and research amounts to only 13 percent of the monies allocated to the NEH. The rest of the outlay goes to a wide range of worthy activities, but are at best "loosely linked" to scholarly research and academic programming.³⁰

The conclusions recent data provide make plain that while Americans invest a great deal in humanistic activities, little of their support goes toward academic scholarship, research,

²⁹ Alan Brinkley, "The Landscape of Humanities and Research and Funding" *Humanities Indicators* (2009) The American Academy of Arts and Sciences (<http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/essays/brinkley.pdf>).

³⁰ Brinkley also notes that private sources do not do much better. Only 2.1 percent of foundation giving went to humanities activities (most nonacademic), a 16% relative decline since 1992.

promotion, and faculty hiring in the humanities. Additionally, as Brinkley observes, more people come into contact with the humanities through local programs than through academic scholarship, including most undergraduates. In other words, as Brinkley says, “There is an important connection between what academics do and what the public sees, but little connection between the money that goes to public activities and the scholars who provide much of the knowledge on which these activities rely.” Be that as it may, the disparities between funding for the humanities on the one hand, and the practical and social sciences on the other (upper) hand, are ultimately driven (read: justified) by market demand.

Brinkley concludes by repeating the claim that the humanities should not be devalued because of their lack of utility or instrumentality; *what* they contribute is fundamental for the continuity and future of the American democracy. However, as the market demands of the new global economy continue to dictate educational priorities and programming, and absent a new monetary or data metric that might reflect the *external worth* of the humanities, restructuring of university curricula and federal funding to reflect the “need” for the humanities will remain a distant if not an unrealistic goal.

IV. Alarming Trends

The marketization narrative of education was sadly reinforced when the Obama White House recently issued the following statement without any inquiries as to the implications for colleges and universities, let alone humanities and liberal arts courses:

Scientific discovery and technological innovation are major engines of increasing productivity and are indispensable for creating economic growth, safeguarding the environment, improving the health of the population and safeguarding our national security in the technology driven 21st century. To this end, the administration is already investing in: high risk, high-payoff research; making permanent the Research and Experimentation tax credit; targeting investment in promising clean air technologies; improving health outcomes while lowering costs; and nurturing a scientifically literate

population as well as a world-class, diverse science, technology, engineering and mathematics workforce (Orszag and Holdren 2009).

In his last State of the Union speech President Obama also proudly proclaimed that “we want to prepare 100,000 new teachers in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math.” The administration’s intentions are clear: America needs innovation to compete with China and other advanced societies. And it is perfectly reasonable “to tie innovation in certain fields to the production of citizens who are technically, mathematically and scientifically skilled . . . But is that what’s wrong with American education . . .?” recently inquired Stanley Fish. In other words, is what is wrong with education “. . . too few students who acquire the market-oriented skills we need to compete (a favorite Obama word) in the global economy and too few teachers capable of imparting them? Is winning the science fair the goal that defines education? A dozen more M.I.T.s and Caltechs and fewer great-book colleges and we’d be all right?”³¹

Another alarming account of what is ailing the humanities and the future prospects of higher education is offered in a new book by sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. The book’s title is *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* and its thesis is that what is limited – in short supply – is learning that is academic rather than consumerist or market-driven. After two years of college, the authors report, students are “just slightly more proficient in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing than when they entered.”³²

The book cites data from student surveys and transcript analysis to show that many college students have minimal class work expectations – and then it tracks the academic gains (or stagnation) of 2,300 students of traditional college age enrolled at a range of four-year colleges and universities. The students took the Collegiate Learning Assessment (which is

³¹ Stanley Fish, “Race to the Top of What? Obama on Education” *New York Times* (January, 2011).

³² Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

designed to measure gains in critical thinking, analytic reasoning and other “higher level” skills taught at college) at various points before and during their college educations, and the results are not encouraging:

- 45 percent of students “did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning” during the first two years of college.
- 36 percent of students “did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning” over four years of college.
- Those students who do show improvements tend to show only modest improvements. Students improved on average only 0.18 standard deviations over the first two years of college and 0.47 over four years.
- What this means is that a student who entered college in the 50th percentile of students in his or her cohort would move up to the 68th percentile four years later – but that’s the 68th percentile of a new group of freshmen who haven’t experienced any college learning.³³

V. Possible Causes

In the years following the end of the Civil War, a new understanding of higher education took root in the United States. Modeling the modern German universities, the majority of American universities, both new and old, increasingly embraced a “research-driven” ideal. This this new ideal emphasized the progressive character of human knowledge and functions as a type of scholarship characterized by the development of “original contributions” to the body of knowledge in which “the fruits of research” are contained.³⁴

Confronted with the emergence of the industrial economy, American universities concerned themselves more with mass-producing knowledge fields, such as engineering, physics, and chemistry.³⁵ Largely dependent on Department of Defense funding and in anticipation of producing weapons of war, the first university-industry partnerships were with the

³³ Taken from a review recently provided *Inside Higher Ed* (January 11, 2011) http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/01/18/study_finds_large_numbers_of_college_students_don_t_learn_much

³⁴ Kronman, 194.

³⁵ Slaughter, 14.

Federal Government and private corporations. Displacing philosophy, history, theology, and literature, the “superiority” of and demand for scientific or industrialized knowledge was offered as the theoretical justification for the institutionalization of the new research-driven ideal in universities.³⁶ Not only did this explanation allow professors and university administrators to serve the industrial economy and the state, but in doing so, they arguably gained power and pride of place by claiming a “social contract” with the state and society in return for disinterested nonpartisan research.³⁷

In an effort to compete with the rising demand of “industrialized” or scientific knowledge and so profit from the revenues now attributed to it, a great many of humanities and liberal arts professors also adopted the research-driven ideal as constitutive of their own discipline. As a result, the humanities became less concerned with the transmission of a valued tradition or a canon of learning than they were with contributing to the ever progressive and instrumental “storehouse of knowledge.” According to Anthony Kronman, the new research-driven ideal encouraged humanities professors to “supersede” history and tradition, measuring their academic success not by “the proximity” of their thoughts to the great literary, political, and philosophical works of the past but by profitable results and by the distance between them, i.e., “by how far” one has “progressed” beyond his/her ancestors’ “inferior state” of knowledge.³⁸ Kronman concludes that,

What from the standpoint of secular humanism was a source of comfort and consolation thus becomes in the system of values promoted by the research ideal something to be

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ E.T. Eilva and Sheila Slaughter, *Serving Power: The Making of the Social Science Expert* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984). Not only is public interest in science goods “subsumed in the increased growth expected from a strong knowledge economy” but knowledge itself is construed as a private good, valued only for “creating streams of high-technology products” that yield profit as they flow through the global market” (Slaughter, 29).

³⁸ A point made by Anthony Kronman (118).

resisted, even despised – a narrow menu of stereotypes that cramp the individual’s drive to be original.³⁹

But that the humanities shifted their attention to a research-driven ideal does *not* deny the fact that the research ideal itself was and continues to be remarkably fruitful for humanities programming and university life. As we saw, new discoveries in science, architecture, physics, and chemistry, for example, bespeak to the inherent good of the progressive movement of knowledge. They contribute to a greater understanding of the natural world’s intelligibility and, consequently, are not without considerable value (even for the humanities). In fact, the same can be said of the social sciences’ contributions to civil society. But the promise and purpose of the research-driven ideal as characteristic, or rather *definitive* of the humanities and liberal arts’ pedagogy and/or curricula is less clear.

Unlike the natural and social sciences, humanities and liberal arts departments seem incapable of producing results that confirm their own validity or instrumentality. As was discussed, the point of the humanities and liberal arts is to allow students to place culture, their situation and ideas in critical view, in light of the historical and philosophical tradition within which they live. The goal of education is not alone the “production” or “marketing” of industrial or “instrumental” knowledge.

Be that as it may, postbellum professors and university administrators began to *judge* the humanities and liberal arts from only the research-driven perspective, redefining them along the new pedagogical and ideological lines. Unfortunately, what resulted was not an increase in humanities programming but rather the slow erosion of the value and authority such courses once enjoyed as reliable *guides* understanding culture, life, and one’s place in society.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Kronman, 134. I do not wish herein to endorse any kind of “decisionism”, i.e., that the humanities ought to endorse one particular “meaning” of life. To be sure, I am not arguing for a belief in something,

At the turn of the 21st century, the focus of university and humanities curricula shifted once again – this time to market and market-like activities. Currently, most colleges and universities are not only concerned with generating instrumental and innovative knowledge but also external revenues and new networks of capitalistic resources. As a result of an increasingly informational and globally integrated society, some scholars currently argue that knowledge is understood more as “raw material” to be converted into products, processes, or services – items that can be owned, marketed, and sold at profit. As Shelia Slaughter and Gary Rhoades contend, this kind of focus, coupled with new circuits of knowledge, an emphasis on new investment and marketing strategies, interstitial organizational emergence, networks that intermediate between public and private sectors, and an extended managerial capacity necessarily link colleges and universities, as well as their faculty and students, to the new economy.⁴¹

For Slaughter and Rhoades, these practices and behaviors on the part universities “constitute” an “academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime.”⁴² Overall, these researchers maintain that colleges and universities are shifting from a “public good knowledge/learning regime” to an “academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime.”⁴³ The former is characterized not only by valuing knowledge as a public good to which the citizenry has claims, but also by norms such as communalism, universality, the free flow of knowledge, and ideals of secular

but rather that the humanities return to a more serious, objective, but potentially contentious, presentation of the underlying philosophies and histories of Western Civilization. Humanities professors ought to refrain from establishing any criteria by which one should judge between various philosophies, even Western ones. Nevertheless, insisting that the humanities return to a study of the roots of Western Identity on the one hand, and identifying these roots as indeed foundational to a great many modern civilizations on the other, does not contradict the belief that the instruction of the humanities can be done objectively, without prejudice, and be of great value to students.

⁴¹ This, as I understand it, is the main thesis of Slaughter and Rhoades (13).

⁴² Slaughter, 15.

⁴³ Slaughter, 28.

humanism. The public good knowledge/learning regime “paid heed to academic freedom,” they argue, which

. . . honored professors’ right to follow research where it lead and gave professors rights to dispose of discoveries as they saw fit . . . The cornerstone of the public good knowledge regime was basic science that led to the discovery of new knowledge within the academic disciplines, serendipitously leading to public benefits.⁴⁴

The “academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime” on the other hand, values knowledge’s privatization and profit-taking in which universities, “inventor” faculty, and corporations have claims that precede those of the public. A product of the postbellum research-driven ideal, Slaughter and Rhoades observe that

Public interest in science goods are subsumed in the increased growth expected from a strong knowledge economy . . . Knowledge is construed as a private good, valued for creating streams of high-technology products that generate profit as they flow through global markets. . . The cornerstones of the academic capitalism model are basic science for use and basic technology, models that make the case that science is embedded in commercial possibility.⁴⁵

According to this model, the separation between the kind of knowledge that results from academic research and the kind of knowledge that results from the market’s activity is very little. Research and discovery that produce marketable/profitable goods is consequently valued more than the content and/or research provided by such disciplines as the humanities, programs that traditionally treat knowledge as a “public good” pursued for its own sake.

However, since the turn of the 20th century, humanities professors have attempted to evolve alongside their scientific but more “productive” colleagues, attempting to appropriate as their own the ends and objectives of the new academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime. Not only does this model have the adverse effect of treating knowledge as an inaccessible good, available only to the technologically or academic elite, but insofar as the academic capitalist

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Slaughter, 29.

knowledge/learning regime reveres non-humanistic disciplines and principles as “mechanisms” for the production of high-technology and profit-orientated products, the humanities, many contend, will be without any legitimate strategy (and/or foundation) for how they will successfully position themselves in its wake. In other words, departments and disciplines that are close to markets – namely, biotechnology, medical sciences, economics, and information technology – have inherent advantages in the academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime that the humanities lack. As we saw, this does not mean that the humanities are of no value to undergraduate education or are unequipped to survive in the new economy. The open questions just become: How will they survive in the academic capitalistic knowledge/learning regime? And what strategies will humanities professors employ to ensure it?

These questions are critical ones. Will the humanities will be forced to redefine their discipline in order to effectively compete with profitable technologically based sciences, somehow offering innovative products and services which can be used as marketable goods, or boldly reaffirm their own non-instrumental but not invaluable worth as intellectual thoroughfares to the past. Or perhaps does the solution possibly lie somewhere in the middle?

VI. Conclusion

Public debate is rife with questions concerning the identity and future of American culture, as well as its precise role in the larger global community. Just what does it mean to *be* an American citizen within an increasingly multicultural and diverse population? More broadly, what does it mean to be a responsible world citizen in an increasingly globalized society? And what role do the humanities play in answering or in the formation of either?

Martha Nussbaum eloquently argues that the vacuum left by conventional ideas about the value of education and American identity has been filled by an instrumental conception, tied not

to the notions of citizenship and moral autonomy but to short-term economic success. This has serious implications. “If this trend continues,” she argues, “nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful, docile, technically trained machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements.”⁴⁶

It appears, then, that a liberal and humanistic education serves liberal and democratic ends by remaining true to its highest ideals. Not only is protecting the classroom from politicization and ideological/religious extremism of national interest but so is protecting society from the attrition of a country’s cultural and intellectual history. The education of students in the origins of democracy, toleration, moderation, human dignity and rights – all values and ideals unique to a humanities classroom – serves both the students and the liberal democracies of which they are citizens, well. The price paid otherwise is arguably the dissolution of the liberal democracy itself . . . the kind of democracy that has, incidentally, helped form the new, distinctively capitalistic, and increasingly democratic global economy.

Enabling the kind of academic environment that supports a humanistic or liberal education, however, depends on stable, national political coalitions that enact supportive legislation. Problematically, since the late 1970s the majority of federal policies and legislation stimulated the academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime rather than the public good knowledge/learning regime. While the intention was to link colleges and universities to the new global economy, the academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime increasingly took hold of the other and is largely responsible for the shift in education pedagogy and curriculum away from the humanities and liberal arts and toward science and technology.

⁴⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) 178ff.

In their book *Academic Capitalism*, Slaughter and Rhoades first point to the shift toward market segmentation that occurred in the early 1970s when federal legislation shifted to supplying institutional student aid, making students consumers.⁴⁷ Interested in higher education, the Committee on Economic Development (CED) emphasized the market value of private higher education through public subsidy. The authors observe that “Federal legislation supported market like competition for students among higher education institutions on the grounds that greater efficiency would lead to cost reductions.”⁴⁸ But as tuition costs escalated, federal loans subsidized markets in students by “providing relatively privileged students the funds to choose high-tuition institutions.” Thusly, higher education was “construed less as a necessary or public or social good” and more as “an individual or private good. . .”⁴⁹ In Slaughter and Rhoades’ view, this not only justified the “user pays” policies of universities but also justified the emphasis universities placed on producing the kind of students readily adaptable to the market’s demands.

It may not be unreasonable to suggest, then, that the shift in educational pedagogy from an emphasis on the humanities and liberal arts to an emphasis on market-based disciplines may also be the result of the desire of administrators to strengthen the market position of their own university rather than the desire of the students to repay their large debts. As Slaughter and Rhoades conclude, because the success of graduates signals the success of the school, the function of students as both consumers and potentially profitable products, “fashions a virtual circle of competition in which students and institutions in the same (elite) market segments compete ever more vigorously with and for each other, contributing to the instantiation of an

⁴⁷ Slaughter, 46. Legislation that relates to technology, specifically patent-driven technology, also contributed to the shift in educational pedagogy. These authors point to the Plant Variety Protection Act of 1971, the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, together with the 1980 Supreme Court decision, *Diamond v. Chakrabarty* (447 US 202) which allowed universities to hold patents on a variety of lucrative biotechnology based research projects (51).

⁴⁸ Slaughter, 42.

⁴⁹ Slaughter, 43.

academic capitalism knowledge/learning regime.”⁵⁰ The lack of humanities and liberal arts funding, as well as a marked decline in enrollment in their courses, is a poor but accurate reflection of the priorities many university administrators sadly but not unreasonably convey.

The other open question is whether (if?) Congress can (should?) ensure the survival of the humanities and the arts in higher education, especially given the degree to which the current educational practices are largely research and/or market driven. Should there be a national political coalition that supports the public good knowledge/learning regime just as much as there is one to support the academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime? If so, of what will it consist? How, exactly, congressional officials may direct a shift back towards a qualifiedly more “liberal” education, however, is another but still important matter.

⁵⁰ Slaughter, 44.