

In Brief: **The Teaching of the Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future**

The Arts and Humanities teach us how to describe, evaluate, and change the world.

The terms of art and philosophy are irreplaceable for our articulate *description* of the world, without which we fall painfully mute. The capacity precisely to describe experience of the world also provokes *evaluation* of the world, through the act of deliberative criticism. Our rigorous, receptive responsiveness to art and philosophy provokes an answering responsibility to the world. As we answer, we also seek to harness art's capacity to help us imagine *transformation* of the world. Every work of art is an act of recreative making. Art thereby models the liberating way in which the world itself might be remade.

The Humanities prompt a deeply satisfying, passionate pedagogic enterprise (for both teachers and students). The dynamism of that enterprise derives from the relation between the private study, the classroom and the world beyond. The need to underscore this nexus of illuminating reception and constructive evaluation by the Arts and the Humanities is all the more urgent given the historical moment we face, a moment characterized by economic, military, ecological, religious and technological challenges of mighty profile.

We therefore judge that this is a timely moment to re-articulate the extraordinary promise of the Humanities. Our undergraduates are preparing to act adroitly in a global environment; they are also preparing to flourish in an austere job

market. The Arts and the Humanities are essential on both inter-related fronts, cultural and personal. This document (an abbreviation of a more meditative exposition) offers such an articulation.

Challenges and Opportunities

The transmission to undergraduates of distinctive forms of thought in the Humanities is under pressure in both the United States and broadly analogous nations. Related economic and vocational forces in particular challenge the study of the Humanities at the undergraduate level. In this document we therefore focus on the transmission of a culture of the Humanities to undergraduates.

A few quick statistics, the bad news followed by good:

(The bad news): Between 1966 and 2010, Bachelor's Degree Completions in the Humanities halved nationwide, falling from 14 to 7% of all degrees taken.

The story in Harvard College is broadly consistent with that nationwide decline. The percentage of Humanities concentrators falls over the last 60 years from 24 to 17.

Within a more recent and narrower time-span, the numbers of “would-be” concentrators show a steep decline from 27% to 18% of pre-freshmen between 2006 and the class of 2016. The actual percentages of Humanities concentrators between 2003 and 2012 also declined from 21 to 17%.

(The good news): student satisfaction with their concentration tends to be consistently higher in Humanities concentrations than in other divisions.

Once students declare a concentration, they remain faithful to Humanities concentrations in impressive and rising numbers.

The key statistic here is, in our view, the following: over the last 8 years, more than half of students who as pre-Freshmen indicated an intention to concentrate in a Humanities concentration ended up in a different division. 50% graduated in a social science, 27% either in Government (11%), Psychology (8%), or Economics (8%).

We conclude from these statistics that we should be focusing our efforts on the freshman experience, which is where we lose a striking number of students who matriculate with an intention to concentrate in a Humanities discipline. We are also particularly struck by the fact that when students come to Harvard, they show interest in concentrations based significantly on their desire to contribute positively to society. This might be pertinent to the movement to Social Sciences; we should take that into account as we reform Humanities instruction.

Looking Forward

We define prospective reform within a set of recurrent binaries that characterize discussion of Humanities teaching, as follows:

- (i) ***Specialization/Generalization:*** Can one effectively specialize without a frame of general knowledge in the first place? Is our ideal undergraduate an applicant to graduate school in our discipline, or a person trained as, in the words of one colleague, an “internationally competent mediator of cultural

history”? We think the latter, and so reaffirm the generalist, interdisciplinary tradition of undergraduate teaching.

- (ii) *Appreciation/Critique.* We should teach students how to appreciate artifacts of extraordinary depth. But we should also encourage our undergraduates to sharpen their powers of critique. The socially constructive role of the Humanities is premised on that power of critique. Appreciation and critique are both essential in a world driven by mesmerizing and often dehumanizing forces.

- (iii) *Recovery of Knowledge/Discovery of Knowledge.* Whereas the sciences *discover* knowledge never previously known, the Humanities more often than not *recover* knowledge, from an immense archive, that has been lost and found and lost over long chronologies. That recovered knowledge is always fresh in the new circumstances of its recovery. We look to co-operation with other divisions and even schools by providing the cultural histories of given problems.

- (iv) *Knowledge for its own Sake/Present Concerns.* A frequent defense of Humanities learning is knowledge for its own sake. We rather think that Humanities learning, like much scientific learning, begins from the predicament of the present. We draw on historically long and deep archives as we address the present, precisely because our perspective will be enlightened by salient difference, whether of time or place.

- (v) *Great Books/Popular Culture.* We do not recognize this opposition, and instead feel that we should only be teaching works that we think are great.
- (vi) *Disciplinary knowledge/Transferrable competences.* Teachers of the Humanities should be unembarrassed about promoting the extraordinary technical competences (especially that of lucid and persuasive writing and speaking) that derive from disciplinary training.
- (vii) *Information/Interpretation.* The Humanities have an extraordinary opportunity with electronic information storage and retrieval. That same opportunity also presents a danger, of information overload. We should consciously place the irreducible need for located, ethically self-conscious interpretation at the center of all Humanities training.

In conclusion, we summarize the practical encouragements of our report thus:

- **Even if we can certainly do better, we should continue to provide demonstrably excellent undergraduate teaching;**
- **We should arrest and reverse the decline of concentrator numbers by focusing on freshmen;**
- **We should reaffirm the critical, yet generalist and interdisciplinary tradition of undergraduate teaching;**

- We should enlarge what we are doing by focusing on the interface between the Humanities and other divisions (notably some of the Social Sciences) or even other schools. Of course we should not aim to imitate the Social Sciences, but our students do consistently express the desire to contribute positively to society; we should reflect on that in course definition;
- We should emphasize the career paths and job satisfaction that the Humanities do enable, both directly and via professional post- graduate schools.

Respectfully submitted

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