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How Not to Defend the Liberal Arts

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Essay on the state of the liberal arts

Submitted by Paul Jay on October 27, 2014 - 3:00am

It shouldn't be surprising that the recent conference at St. John's College, in Santa Fe, entitled "What is Liberal Education For?" should have turned into an occasion for blaming a host of difficult challenges currently faced by the humanities and the liberal arts on critical theory and political correctness. I wasn't there, but that seems to be one of the conference's main preoccupations as reported by *Inside Higher Ed* in an article entitled "Doing Themselves In?"^[1] After all, St. John's, with its great books curriculum, is known for proudly embracing a traditional approach to a liberal arts education. And that's great. The country needs institutions of higher learning that take diverse approaches to humanistic education.

However, it's depressing to see such a thoroughly discredited argument being made in late 2014. The idea put forward by one of the conference's major speakers, John Agresto, that the liberal arts are "dying" because of critical theory and the politicization of faculty, is not only overblown. It recycles an old and faulty argument that should have been set aside years ago.

What is the evidence for Agresto's claim? According to the *Inside Higher Ed* article, he cites "worrisome statistics," including that "English, long a go-to concentration, now accounts for just 3 percent of majors nationwide." Like similar claims, Agresto's are misleading. For one thing, English has never been a "go-to concentration." English majors since 1975 have never counted for more than 4.4 percent of all majors. This hardly makes English a "go-to concentration."

And while his claim suggests there has been some kind of steep fall-off in English majors over the last four decades, that just isn't so. In 1975, as I just noted, English majors constituted 4.4 percent of all majors. In 1980-81, years in which the U.S. experienced an economic recession, that number understandably fell a bit to 3.4 percent. However, by 1995-96, as the economy recovered, it was back up to 4.2 percent, and by 2002-03 it was holding pretty steady at 4.0 percent. There was another small dip in 2007-08 (3.5 percent) and by 2010-11, even with the great recession, it was hanging on at 3.1 percent. If these statistics are any indication, with the economy improving they will go back up a bit.

As an English professor I wish more students were majoring in English, but the fluctuations in the index Agresto cites are hardly all that dramatic. More importantly, the downturns correlate much more strongly with economic recessions in the early 1970s, the early 1990s, and between 2008 and 2010 than they do with the rise of critical theory or an interest in humanities scholars and their students in the relationship between history, philosophy, literature, religion, the arts, and political and social justice issues. It's a simple fact that the evidence for claims like Agresto's that critical theory and political correctness have ruined the liberal arts and humanities just don't hold water. They substitute weak statistical evidence for what are really ideological polemics.

As many researchers I cite in my recent book on the humanities crisis^[2] have pointed out, critics of the

contemporary humanities like Agresto use 1970 – the historical high point of humanities majors – as the point from which they chart a decline. But enrollments in the humanities have held steady between 1984 and 2010 at about 6.5 percent,^[3] with a few upticks between 1988 and 1996. As Ben Schmidt rightly observes “the overall pattern gives the lie to arguments that claim the humanities are being eroded by things like ethnic studies or a departure from the classics. Students aren’t any less interested in majoring in history or English now than they were at the moment deconstructionism hit American shores.”

And while the number of English majors has fallen at some Ivy League institutions, according to Scott Saul (“The Humanities in Crisis? Not at Most Schools”^[4]) nationwide humanities majors in English, foreign languages and literatures and the arts have held steady at between 9.8 and 10.6 percent over the last two decades. He notes that according to Humanities Indicators, a project of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, the share of bachelor’s degrees earned in the humanities has stayed remarkably steady between 1987 and 2010 (10 percent in 1987, and about 11 percent in 2010, with some brief fluctuations up during the overall period). Saul echoes Schmidt in pointing out that these statistics suggest that “we must straighten out one of the great misconceptions that has circulated around humanities professors: that we are a trendy lot, ‘tenured radicals’ wrenching the curriculum into irrelevance as we impose the latest theoretical paradigm upon it.”

If the liberal arts and humanities are in trouble, and in many ways they are, these troubles have little to do with the development of new theories, methodologies, and subject matters. Indeed, such developments ought to be welcome in higher education. Those of us who teach literature, history, religious studies, and the arts are professors, after all, professionals whose work is expected by our colleagues in the natural and social sciences to be theoretically and methodologically rigorous. It’s a myth that the sciences have theories and methods and the humanities don’t, and it’s a mistake to scapegoat theory and professionalization for the current plight of the humanities and liberal arts.

Inside Higher Ed reported that, according to Agresto, in order to “save the humanities” from the pernicious effects of critical theory we must instill “critical thinking skills.” However, it makes no sense to claim the liberal arts are about critical thinking, and then to trash critical theory, which teaches critical thinking. Humanism was about nothing if it wasn’t about critiquing the status quo. And how can the liberal arts be blamed for causing their own ruin by connecting questions about the human to the world of politics and social justice when humanism has always been all about raising questions about political and social agency? Traditionalists like Agresto and Andrew Delbanco, a professor of English at Columbia University who has frequently advocated for a traditional approach to the humanities that eschews critique, too often seem to want to seal the liberal arts off from such issues (and worse still, to protect them from constructive criticism). In doing so they’re actually undermining the very tradition they claim to defend.

The big problem here is that critics like Agresto and Delbanco don’t spend enough time analyzing the real plight of the liberal arts and humanities. That plight has a lot more to do with a set of economic and institutional problems that threaten colleges and universities everywhere. It’s just that the fallout from these problems has hit the humanities disproportionately hard because we’re in a weaker position than the natural and social sciences to stake a claim for the centrality of the subjects we research and teach at a time when the traditional liberal arts model for measuring the value of a higher education has begun to shift to a corporate one.

The corporatization of higher education represents a dramatic shift toward seeing higher education as vocational training, an educational experience geared to credentialing, in which the value of courses and programs are defined narrowly in terms of their practical vocational utility. It’s not surprising that these developments have hit the humanities particularly hard, that our disciplines are so vulnerable in an age that increasingly puts the educational emphasis on computational, technological, and mechanical skills at the expense of a broad-based education in history, philosophy, and the arts. If the value of education is increasingly being measured by trustees and legislators too ready to replace a liberal arts model of higher

education with a vocational training model of higher education, then it's no wonder the humanities seem to be in crisis.

This means that defending the integrity of the humanities today ought to have little if anything to do with bashing theory or calling for a return to “tradition” (on the drawbacks of arguments based on tradition, see [Judge Richard Posner's brilliant analysis](#) ^[5] in his recent decision on gay marriage in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit.). That's simply indulging in ideological battles that distract us from our real problems. Engaging those problems means defending the integrity of higher education. It means resisting the marginalizing of faculty voices in academic and curricular matters, resisting the institution of managerial structures at colleges and universities that lead to bloated bureaucracies and an over investment in non-curricular matters broadly related to “student life” at the expense of investing in more tenure-track faculty, more classrooms, and more support for a broad liberal arts education. But at the same time it means finding a way to articulate the value of a humanities education that stresses both our traditional commitment to the intangible -- rewards that Agresto and Delbanco rightly point out come from studying philosophy, history, literature and the arts -- while also stressing what is new and innovative about the humanities in the 21st century, and the transferable skills they impart to students.

I don't think it will do to simply fall back on well-worn, boilerplate defenses of the humanities that characterize their value narrowly in terms of the inner journey they promote and the big questions they pose, as a place where we can help our students to discover the meaning of life and to find themselves. Such defenses are too often elegiac -- laments for the passing of what often looks like an overly narrow, idealized, or even sentimental vision of what the humanities were, one that simply feeds the idea they're a little quaint and outdated. Don't get me wrong. I embrace the idea that studying the humanities has a value for its own sake, and I'm deeply committed to the idea that the liberal arts ought to be a place where our preoccupation with the practical and the utilitarian can be submitted to constructive critical scrutiny.

But I believe that in the 21st century we need to present a broader, more nuanced, innovative and forward-looking vision of the humanities, and that such a vision need not be seen as a betrayal of what we have always been doing. We need to characterize the value of the humanities in a way that stresses not just the inner nourishment they can bring, but the reading, analytical, research, writing, and critical thinking skills humanities courses teach our students as well, skills that are manifestly transferable to a range of employment opportunities (for more on this argument see the article I co-authored with Gerald Graff, “[Fear of Being Useful](#)” ^[6]).

And crucially, it also means stressing the innovative, even transformative work that has unfolded in the humanities over the last 30 or 40 years, work that has served to reshape our understanding of the human and to challenge our ideas about liberty, agency, responsibility, social justice, and the relationship between humans, technology, and the biosphere in which we all live. We do a disservice to ourselves when, in explaining what we do in the humanities, or in defending their value, we play down or disparage the innovative role that theory has had in deepening, enriching, and challenging our understanding of the human, especially in the attention it has insisted we pay to the complex ways in which social and political power flows through cultural forms and shapes human subjectivity. Our challenge is not simply to defend the humanities, but to defend a new humanities, one in part defined by a critique of the very humanism that historically defined the humanities in the first place. It simply won't do to pretend that the last 30 or 40 years never happened, or worse still, to blame productive innovation during those years for challenges that are in reality economic and institutional.

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[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/10/20/conference-speakers-say-liberal-arts-must-return-purer-form-survive>

[2] <http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/the-humanities-paul-jay/?K=9781137403308>

[3] <http://benschmidt.org/Degrees/#HumRatio>

[4] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/04/opinion/the-humanities-in-crisis-not-at-most-schools.html?_r=0

[5]

http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/08/27/listen_to_judge_richard_posner_destroy_arguments_against_gay_marriage.html

[6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/01/05/essay-new-approach-defend-value-humanities>

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