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“The Liberal Arts at Home and at Work”

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Introduction

How many of you have had the experience of touring an older industrial city, perhaps in the company of a local booster keen to describe the city’s glorious past, exhibit its vibrant present, and sketch its exciting future? You’re likely to have been shown the redeveloped business district, with some gleaming skyscrapers, transportation hubs, and commercial redevelopment. Much would have been made of the “world-class,” “cutting-edge,” and “competitive” facilities businesses could find there.

You might also have been taken to an historic residential district containing older homes—some stately, some merely quaint—and period architecture from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of the homes might have been shuttered and others in visible need of repair, but the overall gentility of the neighborhood would have been quite forgiving of these lapses. Your guide most likely pointed out that these homes were but a remnant of a larger area that suffered from either urban blight or had undergone wholesale renewal, but that the neighborhood had stabilized and was now prized for the evocative character it helped lend the entire city. Indeed, it was the contrast between the “historic” district and the realm of today that made each seem so distinctive.

Where are we—the liberal arts and the humanities—to be found in this city tour? Are we at work in the bustling downtown, or are we the genteel residential district, once grand, now somewhat down at the heels, yet ever hopeful that new and younger residents might bring with them energy and revitalization (though always, of course, within the strict preservationist norms prescribed for renovations of historic districts)? I wonder if most of the public and perhaps even some in this room wouldn’t choose the latter answer. We stand for the historic, they would say, we stand for the enduring, and we stand apart. We are the home of knowledge. But are we also at work?

The latter half of my title is inspired by a project of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation called, with some deliberate provocation, “The Humanities at Work.” The Foundation states that it “is working to increase awareness of the value of humanities training and education to society at large, and in so doing, to expand career opportunities for Ph.D.’s both inside and outside the academy.” Its project “encourages talented humanities Ph.D.’s to take their knowledge of human history, society, and culture, along with their skills in languages, communication, project management and critical thinking, and to put them to the

service of the larger community” and also “encourages companies, non-profit organizations, schools, and government agencies to mine this rich seam of talent both for the understanding of the values that bind our society and for proven abilities.”¹

This is not the first time the foundation world has embarked on such an effort. Not long ago Woodrow Wilson’s Responsive Ph.D. program embraced many of the same aims, and in the 1980s the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation also tried to help humanities Ph.D.’s shut out of a shrunken academic job market retool and prepare themselves for careers in other sectors. As far as this new program is concerned, it may come as news to the humanists in the audience that the rigorous research and careful teaching that have conditioned your careers are not “work,” but you, of course, are not the Foundation’s primary audience. They mean to address the vague but durable public image that my opening metaphor sought to convey, that is, the sense that the liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular exist in a world different in pace, purpose, and values from what your high school guidance counselor called—in capital “W’s”—“the World of Work.” I don’t want to take the time to describe how those differences are perceived, but I do want to note that some, perhaps some of us, not only accept that difference but exalt in it, in the distance between town and gown.

I am convinced, however, that we are weakened precisely to the extent that we see this as an “either/or” question: i.e. that our work is either directly relevant to or engaged with the world of affairs, or it is a world apart in which outsiders are welcome, but only on our terms. I believe we need to articulate the public meaning and importance of our own work with effectiveness and care.

When I travel from home to work, I usually walk, but when the weather is bad I’ll take the New York City subway, where some cars for the past year have been carrying an advertisement for an institution called the School of Practical Philosophy.² Entitled “PHILOSOPHY WORKS,” the ad extends a bold promise:

This ten week philosophy course offers students an effective and novel approach to the great questions of life. It takes the master philosophers of East and West and examines how they can be put to immediate use. Through discussion, practice and observation, students explore such questions as Who am I? What am I doing here? What am I meant to be doing? The Course shows how these enormous questions are not of passing theoretical interest but are an effective guide to life and how it can be lived to the fullest. The result is happiness and freedom from the small and binding circles of habitual existence.

This promise is illustrated with two drawings: a morose, downcast fish confined to a small bowl, and an exuberant—presumably post ten-week course fish—leaping from a lake next to sun-dappled mountains.

¹ <http://www.woodrow.org/phd/About/about.html>

² <http://www.practicalphilosophy.org/>

I repeat this advertisement not as an endorsement but what seems in the end a disappointingly hedonistic sell, as evidence of the public longing for what it offers. Subway ads are costly, and their existence is a sure indication that some market exists for the wares that are being sold. Who would not wish “freedom from the small and binding circles of habitual existence?” Equally important, who will feed this longing if we in the liberal arts do not?

Some—many—think that the effort of some advocates for the liberal arts to draw a connection between our home and the future work of our students is a distraction from our core mission, a dilution of a distinct and precious essence. My friend and predecessor as president of ACLS, Stan N. Katz of Princeton University, for example, decries the “attempt by educators to clothe a process [liberal education] they...believe to be good in itself as utilitarian. The notion of ‘school to work,’” he warns, “has been as damaging to tertiary as to secondary education.”³ Stephen Fix of Williams College, speaking at a conference on the future of the liberal arts college co-sponsored by the ACLS last year, also lamented what he saw as the deleterious impact of linking education and work:

...a college degree is often seen today primarily as a vehicle to economic success for the individual, and for the society at large. For the individual, it’s a relatively sure ticket to a life of financial security, as well as political and social influence.

Thus, the panicked earnestness with which parents coach their kids to compete for admission to the best colleges and universities, and their drum-beat of questions not about what majors their children will do, but what their children will do with their majors. Thus, too, the fear of not being affluent that keeps some of our most promising graduates from choosing careers as high school teachers, or ministers, or agents for non-profit organizations.⁴

But lest we think that the utilitarian repositioning of liberal college education is a dangerous new trope, I must point out that it has been an abiding theme in the rhetoric of American higher education (that could be traced back much farther to classical debates about the purpose of learning and of course to the principles of Dickinson’s founder, Benjamin Rush). In 1914, Charles Frances Thwing, the president of what was to become Case Western Reserve University, published a volume called *The American College: What It Is and What It May Become*. Thwing forthrightly asserted the practical value of liberal education:

If the primary purpose of the ideal college is to give a liberalizing education, a secondary purpose is to make men [*sic.*] of efficiency. The man of efficiency is the man who does the most and the best in ways the most economical. He effects greatest results at least expense. He represents service in every profession and every form of business. He represents commerce and industrialism conducted unto richest results with smallest expenditures...That the college has in the past helped to train men of efficiency is evident to the careful observer and wise interpreter...Everyone recognizes that the disciplined

³ Stanley N. Katz, “Liberal Education after the Ruin of the University,” November 6, 2004, Dartmouth College Conference, “The Liberal Education – Dead or Alive.”

⁴ Stephen Fix, response paper presented for a session titled “Mission and Achievement in Historical Perspectives” at a conference on Liberal Arts Colleges in American Higher Education, Williamstown, MA, November 13-15, 2003. Forthcoming as part of an *ACLS Occasional Paper*.

mind in the best tool for doing any work; and it is needless to add that the disciplined mind is the highest intellectual result of the training which the ideal college seeks to give.⁵

President Thwing makes another point that is well worth remembering almost one hundred years later. It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that institutions of professional education began to require undergraduate degrees for admission, degrees which then were almost certainly credentials in the liberal arts. This reform was thought to mark real progress away from a narrow and ineffectual professional training and toward a legal, medical, or theological education that could equip its graduates with the tools for self-renewing professional practice. Education in the liberal arts was the premise of specialized professional capacity.

As it should be today. As the world becomes more complicated, the premium on the analytical, expressive and conceptual skills of liberally educated individuals will only increase. Stephen Fix, whom I mentioned earlier, while skeptical about a purely materialist argument for liberal education, is nonetheless equally convinced of its vocational relevance. In that same talk given at Williams, for example, he recounted a conversation with the head of human resources for a major aerospace company, who confessed to a preference for hiring philosophy majors. Why? These graduates, he observed, may not, initially, know much about aeronautics or business, but they understand complexity. And that's something the company can't teach them.

Corporate leaders make similar points directly and publicly. Some of you may know the commencement address, "The Process of Distillation and Getting to the Essence of Things," delivered at Stanford in 2001 by Carly Fiorina, President and CEO of Hewlett-Packard. She had majored in medieval history there and told the graduating class that:

The most valuable class I took at Stanford was *not* Econ 51. It was a graduate seminar called, believe it or not, Christian, Islamic and Jewish Political Philosophies of the Middle Ages [and yes, it's unfortunately all too easy to believe, she did say "believe it or not"].

Each week, we had to read one of the great works of medieval philosophy... These were huge texts—it seemed like we were reading 1,000 pages every week. And by the end of the week, we had to distill their philosophical discourse into two pages.

The philosophies and ideologies certainly left an impression on me. But the rigor of the distillation process, the exercise of refinement, that's where the real learning happened. It was an incredible, heady skill to master. Through the years, I've used it again and again—the mental exercise of synthesis and distillation and getting to the very heart of things.⁶

⁵Charles Franklin Thwing, *The American College: What It Is and What It May Become* (New York: The Platt & Peck Co., 1914), pp. 9, 13-14.

⁶http://www.hp.com/hpinfo/execteam/fiorina/stanford_01.html

Some of you may also recall an article in *The New York Times* a couple of years ago about a young woman named Bethany McLean.⁷ She was the writer for *Fortune* magazine who first highlighted hard questions about the balance sheet of Enron. “How exactly does Enron make its money?” she wrote. The information was not in the company’s financial reports. Enron executives called her unethical for asking pointed questions without doing enough research. They tried to convince her bosses she was wrongheaded. They alleged that she had relied on a source who stood to profit if the share price of Enron fell. Well, you know the rest of the story, but what interested me in the article was Bethany McLean’s explanation of why she had been able to do what she did. As a math major with work experience at Goldman Sachs, she had learned how to read Enron’s spread sheets. But as a double major in literature, she had learned something perhaps even more important, to question why those spread sheets looked the way they did. Coming from the humanities, she said, “you want to know why something is the way it is.” In accounting, “there is no reason why. There is no fundamental truth underlying it. It’s just based on rules, and these rules create an incentive to get around rules.” Coming from the liberal arts, of course, she also knew how to tell the story she had uncovered with great effectiveness.

So, the liberal arts can go to work. But what about our homes? Here I mean liberal arts colleges, arts and sciences/colleges of liberal arts within universities, and the disciplines. Since the fate of the liberal arts and the humanities is so closely linked to the soundness of our institutional homes, we need to attend to the strengths of and strains on those structures. If you’ve ever watched the PBS show “This Old House,” you know how much more complicated it is to restore, renovate and preserve than to build anew. I’m here to tell you that even if, indeed because, the humanities and liberal arts are grounded in the past, their best days are ahead. I say this so confidently because the dynamic forces that seem, at this early point, to be defining the 21st century require humanistic learning for their management and development. The forces I have in mind are information technology and globalization, whose dynamics I’ll discuss briefly in relation to liberal learning.

Before I do so, let me emphasize that I do not mean to suggest that the humanities and the liberal arts are interchangeable or identical categories. But I do think that their causes are linked. Both trace their origins as much to the Middle Ages and Renaissance as to the formation of professionalized scholarship in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I think also that their fates are linked in educational practice. Both domains have suffered relative declines in the proportion of undergraduate interest and enrollment nationwide. Both seek their support primarily from private philanthropy and from colleges and universities since federal support for the liberal arts as a category is non-existent and that provided for the humanities is, as one of my colleagues puts it, “decimal dust” when compared to funding for the sciences.

What are the opportunities?

First, *information technology*. It is easy, and not entirely incorrect, to think of the humanities as among the last knowledge domains to cross the digital divide and integrate new information technologies into their work. Indeed, not all of our colleagues have made that

⁷ Felicity Barringer, “Enron’s Many Strands: Early Scrutiny; 10 Months Ago, Questions on Enron Came and Went With Little Notice,” *The New York Times*, 28 January 2002, late ed.: p. A11.

passage, and organizations like ACLS still have much work to do to encourage the fullest exploration of how digitization can enhance our work, both our scholarship and the ways in which we communicate it. But today I want to emphasize that relationship in the reverse, that is, how these new technologies create a demand for the knowledge and skills that are the distinctive contributions of the humanities.

What do I mean by this claim? The answer is a mouse-click away: the internet and the web “work” through texts and images, two phenomena that are the stock-in-trade of the humanities.

Jerome McGann, Professor of English at the University of Virginia and one of the pioneers in applying digital technologies to humanities research, has predicted that: “In the next 50 years the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be re-edited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination. This system, which is already under development, is transnational and transcultural.” And, he asks: “Who will be carrying out this work? Who will do it? Who should do it?”⁸ Not just the techies, but also individuals schooled in the information gathering and ordering skills of the humanities, we can declare, will and must help meet what will be an ever accelerating demand for serious content in our digital domain.

But even as we develop and deepen the digital environment, we must strive to understand how we work in it and how it changes us. This, too, is a task fitted for the humanities, and many scholars are taking it up. My former colleague at UCLA, N. Katherine Hayles, is one of the most prominent of those who have sought to bring the tools of literary and cultural analysis to this new realm.

Calling our attention to the importance of understanding “the development of distributed cognitive environments in which humans and computers interact in hundreds of ways daily, often unobtrusively,” she writes that “The effect of moving in these distributed cognitive environments is often to enhance human functioning...Of course, there is also a downside. As cognition becomes distributed, humans no longer control all the parameters, and in some situations, they don't control the crucial ones, for example in automated weapon systems. Should we therefore hit the panic button and start building big bonfires into which we will toss all the computers?” she asks. No, she suggests that we “think about distributed cognition in historical terms, as something that began happening as soon as the earliest humans began developing technology. External memory storage, for example, isn't limited to computers. It happens as early as humans drawing animals and figures on cave walls to convey information about hunting and ritual activities. Putting contemporary developments in these kinds of contexts will help us,...get away from scare scenarios and begin to think in more sophisticated ways about how human-computer interactions can be fruitful and richly articulated.”⁹

Hayles' work on “Strategies for understanding how words interact with their physical instantiations” is exactly what we need now, as “[i]n electronic environments words can swoop and fly, dance and morph, fade and intensify, change from black to red. How do these behaviors

⁸ Jerome J. McGann, “Literary Scholarship in the Digital Future,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Section: The Chronicle Review, Volume 49, Issue 16, p. B7.

⁹ <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/borghayl.html>

affect meaning, and how does verbal signification affect our understanding of these behaviors?"¹⁰

Globalization. A second great force shaping our world today is the complex of phenomena encompassed by the rubric of "globalization." As Giles Gunn has observed, "*Globalization* is fraught with so many complications and discontents that one almost wishes to substitute another term. As now used, *globalization* conjures up in many minds a spectacle of instantaneous electronic financial transfers, the depredations of free-market capitalism, the homogenization of culture, and the expansion of Western, by which is usually meant American, political hegemony...[G]lobalization generally brings with it, as many of its critics...have noted, the erasure of local differences and the integration of more and more of the world's people, as well as of entire sovereign states, into a geopolitical system that inevitably erodes their ability to shape their own destinies."¹¹ Globalization, as the anthropologist Sherry Ortner once exclaimed at an ACLS meeting, is also "all over the place." That people and products from formerly exotic or even unknown locations are found within the compass of our everyday experience may seem to suggest a unifying simplification of human variety. But, of course, the world has become larger and more complex, and our everyday world is now the whole planet, not just a fraction (local community, nation, region) of it. Cultural particularities persist in demonstrating their enduring power, and here again the liberal arts have a special role to play in enhancing our understanding of them.

It is the humanist's insistence on local knowledge that can help to focus and clarify the vision of the monoptic globalizing lens. If the college of the twenty-first century has declared itself an international institution, then it ought to start by knowing something about the world. (I am preaching to the converted, for I know Dickinson has been a leader in this regard.) Since the tragedies of September 11th we've frequently heard the phrase "now more than ever" used to advocate the need for sustained study of languages and cultures other than our own. But hasn't the imperative always been there, as well as our central role in responding to it? As the Yale sociologist Nancy Rutherford has put it, "Higher education is an aquifer, not a spigot." Colleges and universities, she argues, "cannot be built in response to immediate needs, as the spigot someone can turn on for the expertise they need at the moment...[but] should be conceived as a deep reserve, built up slowly and sustained over the long term, on the assumption that though specific needs will arise, they cannot be anticipated." Mary Louise Pratt, the past president of the MLA, cites Rutherford in observing that "It's no accident that a discussion of international education occasioned this reflection. Deep knowledge of particular parts of the world cannot be produced overnight. It has to be built up over years, supported through real relationships with people and institutions abroad, passed along, invested in, and valued independent of the contingencies, fears, and passions of a moment."¹² This is, of course, why the humanities should always be at the table in any discussion of international studies and why, for example, subjecting language programs to the cyclical fluctuation in student enrollments is both short-sighted and risky.

The phenomena of digitization and of internationalization, therefore, demand precisely the preparation that liberal education provides. They also demand interdisciplinary capacities.

¹⁰ http://frontwheeldrive.com/n_katherine_hayles.html

¹¹ Giles Gunn, "Globalizing Literary Studies," *PMLA*, 116.1, January 2001, pp. 16-31.

¹² Mary Louise Pratt, *MLA Newsletter*, Winter 2003, p. 3.

Any consideration of the problems we face today that is confined to one discipline's methods and concepts is likely to be limited, if not impoverished. This is a point that many have made, of course, and one that appears to have taken especially firm root in the natural sciences. The deciphering of the DNA code, for example, has been credited to the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of its discovery, as Robert Wright has noted: "It took an ex-physicist—Francis Crick—and a former ornithology student—James Watson—to crack the secret of life. They shared a certain wanderlust, an indifference to boundaries." E. O. Wilson's argument for "consilience," "the 'jumping together of knowledge' across disciplines 'to create a common groundwork of explanation,'" has been embraced with enthusiasm by the National Academies and the major federal and private funding agencies, who are convinced that "'disciplinary 'silos' need to [be] broken and interdisciplinary connections are absolutely fundamental [as] the interfaces of the sciences are where the excitement will be the most intense.'"¹³

It may be instructive here to keep in mind that interdisciplinarity is in fact not all that much newer on the horizon than disciplinarity. The term entered academic discourse back in the 1920's, when the Rockefeller Foundation provided funding to establish the Social Science Research Council because it was already concerned about the ossification of disciplines which in fact were just barely taking shape themselves. As Eisenhower is said to have remarked, "Never before have things been so much the way they are as they are today." Many of my colleagues in the humanities roll their eyes when the term "interdisciplinarity" is invoked, impatient with what they see only as an increasingly tiresome mantra being chanted by funding agencies and administrators alike who are always looking for the next new thing around the corner. They will point out that many existing disciplines are inherently interdisciplinary—classical and medieval studies, just to name a couple of those on the cutting edge—and they're absolutely right. As our understanding of the ancient world has depended on contributions from literary, historical, linguistic, papyrological and archeological expertise—just to name a few—so innovation and discovery in more recent and emerging fields like area, ethnic, gender, cultural, environmental and cognitive studies have required and will continue to require the contributions of multiple disciplines. Your own founder, Benjamin Rush, as I know you know, appears to have recognized this possibility as well, when he wrote that "The complaints that have been made against religion, liberty and learning have been made against each of them in a separate state. Perhaps like certain liquors they should be used in a state of mixture. They mutually assist in correcting the abuses and in improving the good effects of each other. From the combined and reciprocal influence of religion, liberty and learning upon the morals, manners, and knowledge of individuals, of these, upon government, and of government upon individuals, it is impossible to measure the degrees of happiness and perfection to which mankind may be raised."¹⁴

Now don't get me wrong: I believe the traditional liberal arts disciplines are vital, and vitally necessary. Without them, we may lose some of the mental discipline that is one of the

¹³ Cited by Diana Rhoten in "Interdisciplinary Research: Trend or Transition," in the Social Science Research Council's *Items & Issues*, 5, No. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2004), pp. 6-8.

¹⁴ Benjamin Rush, "Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic," in *Essays, Literary, Moral and Philosophical* [Philadelphia: Thomas and Samuel F. Bradford, 1798], found at http://chronicles.dickinson.edu/resources/Rush/mode_of_education.html

values of liberal learning. But, to return to my urban metaphor, if we are not prepared to leave what have been called the “gated communities” of our disciplines and mix with others in our own neighborhood, how can we be ready to travel to the “World of Work”? It’s not just a question of solving problems that require collective effort and multiple perspectives, it’s a question, too, of being able to explain the value of what we do to those who live in another world, whether it be in another discipline or someplace outside of the academy altogether. Indeed, venturing beyond the familiar language and territory of a discipline is an excellent preparation for moving into the world.

This is why the tenth anniversary of the Clarke Center deserves celebration. There are over one hundred centers like yours on campuses around the country, a remarkable burgeoning that suggests the extent of the hunger that is being addressed. Each has recognized both the value and the challenge of creating an incubator and a forge for collective thinking and action, of opening doors and creating new spaces for an outward-facing community. What you’ve been able to accomplish, therefore—the extraordinary range of your programming, its timelines and responsibility—constitutes a record of which I’m sure you are justly proud. Sustaining interdisciplinary scholarship is hard, sustaining interdisciplinary scholarship and education is even harder. It’s possible that the past decade at the Clarke Center has seen its share of controversy as well as collegiality. If so, then let me close by noting that Dickinson’s founder Benjamin Rush would have considered this very healthy. “Controversy,” I’m told he once observed, “is only dreaded by the advocates of error.” If we are to have aquifers of knowledge, if we are to have the controversies that keep error at bay, we will need enduring centers such as the one we celebrate this evening.