## **Does Harvard Hate Humanities?**

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by Peter Berkowitz July 8, 2013



Study of the humanities has never been more important to the welfare of the nation. Information whizzes by at breakneck speed. The contest between conservative and progressive visions of government's scope and aim in a free society implicates rival understandings of human nature. The ways of life of people in far-off lands have direct impact on our prosperity and security.

Amidst the flux and uncertainty, the humanities—literature, history, religion, philosophy, and the fine arts—teach us to slow down, savor, and ponder; they illuminate the intricacies of human nature, the age-old patterns into which behavior falls, along with the infinite nuances of personality; and they reveal the cultural roots of our civilization, the humanity of other civilizations, and the inhumanity to which all civilizations, to one degree or another, are prone. The humanities uncover, preserve, and transmit the treasures of the past; provide a refined language and enduring standards for describing and evaluating the present; and nourish our imagination of the future's possibilities. The humanities teach us who we are and help us to determine the kind of human beings we wish to become. They anchor and enliven our freedom.

Therefore, Harvard University is to be commended for seeking with a new report to address "the troubled state of the humanities." The report, "The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future," was composed by a committee of Harvard professors co-chaired by professor of English Homi Bhabha, who is also director of the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard, chair of philosophy Sean Kelly, and professor of English James Simpson. With members drawn from a variety of departments, the committee sought to articulate "the possibilities and promise of the Humanities at the undergraduate level in Harvard College."

And so the committee does, in a rarefied idiom that is at points eloquent and probing but will prove a strain for those not immersed in contemporary academic controversies and not accustomed to professors' penchant for abstraction and abstruseness. Unfortunately, lacking a solid understanding of liberal education, the committee's report fails to state clearly the causes of the humanities' decline, the consequences for students and the nation, and the cure.

The Harvard report was occasioned by statistics that reveal a precipitous deterioration in undergraduate interest in the humanities. Over the last 44 years, the report notes, the share of humanities majors nationwide has dropped by half, from 14 percent to 7 percent of all college degrees awarded. This drop may be attributable, as James Taranto argued in the *Wall Street Journal*, to the boom in college enrollment over that same period, which has brought to universities many more students who value a bachelor's degree for the job it will secure rather than for the love of learning it will fulfill. But that does not explain the abandonment of the humanities by Harvard students during that time.

At Harvard, the decline (including history majors) over the last 60 years has been from 36 percent to 20 percent of all undergraduate degrees. Moreover, while 27 percent of entering freshmen in 2006 expressed an intention of majoring in the humanities, by 2012 the comparable figure was 18 percent.

Perhaps most alarmingly for the humanities at Harvard,

Over the last 8 years, more than half of students who as pre-Freshmen indicate an intention to concentrate in a Humanities concentration end up in a different division. 50% graduate in a social science, 27% in either Government (11%), Psychology (8%), or Economics (8%). Students stating an intention to concentrate in a Humanities discipline are much less loyal to that intention at concentration declaration (57% exodus) than students stating an intention to concentrate in a social science (19% exodus).

What does Harvard do to drive from the humanities so many students who arrive in Cambridge aiming to concentrate in them?

The report summarizes several theories that explain the weakening of student interest by reference to structural features of, and great impersonal forces at work in, social and political life. These include the perceived inability of the humanities to equip students to confront the stiff competition they face in the global economic environment; the absence of a strong literary and artistic tradition in American public life, which leaves the humanities with "no constructive public function"; the success of the natural sciences and social sciences, which make the knowledge yielded by the humanities look soft, relative, and evanescent; and the new digital world of rapid-fire information and communication, which dissipates the capacity for the "deep immersion" and "imaginative engagement" required for appreciation of literary, historical, religious, philosophical, and artistic works.

The report does not deny that these explanations have merit, but concludes that the way for Harvard to draw students back to the humanities is to do what the humanities for the most part already do at Harvard, but better.

The report gingerly recognizes that in recent years the humanities at Harvard appear in some respects to have lost their balance. They have devoted time and energy to "theory and culture wars" at the expense of undergraduate education. They have "possibly become too specialized, allowing the research culture of our faculty and graduate constituencies to dominate the general needs of the undergraduate." They have emphasized "interdisciplinarity," or combining skills and perspectives from a variety of disciplines, while neglecting the need to first acquire excellence in a single discipline. They have stressed the "contested nature of truth," but have slighted their responsibility to provide an understanding of what is being contested by imparting a broad knowledge of the past. And they might have given too much weight to demonstrating how "culture serves power" and exposing "the ways domination and imperialism underwrite cultural production, and the ways the products of culture rehearse and even produce injustice," when they should also explore the wisdom embodied in culture.

Remarkably, the report even gives credence, however tentative, to the suspicion that the humanities at Harvard impose ideological conformity:

[T]hose of us committed to criticism as critique might recognize a kernel of truth in conservative fears about the left-leaning academy. Among the ways we sometimes alienate students from the Humanities is the impression they get that some ideas are unspeakable in our classroom.

## And the report sensibly recommends that in class professors

admit and mark the fact that opinions and orientations shape our thinking; acknowledge the fact that intelligent people may disagree; and encourage real debate rather than the answers our undergraduates are smart enough to know we want to hear.

Welcome as this admonition is, it is incommensurate with the scope of the problem.

The "initiatives" contained in the report's final section will do little to achieve what the committee calls "a collective 'reboot' of undergraduate teaching across the Arts and Humanities." More resources for faculty and internships, more interdisciplinary study, more extracurricular activities, and more use of electronic platforms will not stem the flow of undergraduates to other disciplines.

To begin to restore the humanities to their place of honor, it is necessary to state the problem clearly. The problem is that the humanities today are not oriented toward preparing students for freedom; they do not furnish students' minds with knowledge or sharpen their ability to

think for themselves. As a result, the humanities rob students of an education and deprive the nation of leaders capable of fortifying their judgment with an appreciation of the past and by listening to and learning from others.

To restore the humanities, it is necessary to ensure that students acquire a common foundation in the history of the West and its literary, religious, philosophical, and artistic classics. These shaped our ideas and our institutions. Grappling with them refines our understanding of ourselves and our country.

It is also necessary to study other civilizations, but to do this seriously would require universities, instead of scuttling requirements, to institute substantial foreign language requirements. Nothing is so revealing of multiculturalism's status as a political program rather than a research paradigm than the indifference of its proponents to language study. The humanities should proudly tout the benefits—in commercial life, diplomacy, and national security—that come from mastering foreign languages.

And it is necessary for professors, department chairs, deans, and university presidents to shake off their lassitude and firmly, aggressively, and persistently oppose the intolerance, both methodological and political, that afflicts the humanities. It is an evasion to speak of "a kernel of truth" concerning the well-documented hostility to dissent and diversity of opinion on campus. Indeed, these are prominent features of the humanities landscape, which bright undergraduates quickly discern and from which, precisely if they are blessed with a love of learning, they swiftly flee.

Such simple steps could do much to restore the humanities. It is a measure of the grimness of the situation that, judging by this report of those entrusted with conserving and improving the humanities at Harvard, these steps have little chance of being considered seriously let alone implemented effectively.

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