Christina Elliott Sorum

"Vortex, Clouds, and Tongue": New Problems in the Humanities?

My colleagues and I at Union College are bemused when we hear humanists at other liberal arts colleges lament the "preprofessionalism" of students, which they perceive as a new phenomenon causing shrinking interest and enrollments in the humanities. We teach in a school that long ago played a major role in displacing the traditional classical curriculum—ancient languages and literatures, philosophy, history, and religion—from its dominant role in higher education. In 1827, Eliphalet Nott, then the president of Union, moved "to afford a choice between the ancient and modern languages and also between the branches abstract and scientific and branches practical and particular." In the optional "Scientific Course" he instituted, classical studies were omitted after the freshman year, and one third of the curriculum was given over to science (including optics, physiology, and mineralogy), one third to mathematics, and the rest to modern languages (French or Spanish), social studies, law, English composition, and oratory. This curriculum, which led directly to the professions of engineering, medicine, law, and mining, was soon selected by a third of the students.[1]

In fact, questions about the utility of the traditional classical curriculum with its emphasis on the humanities arose long before pragmatic Americans joined the debate. In fifth-century Athens, the discussion was enough of a commonplace for Aristophanes to mock it in his plays. In the *Clouds*, for example,

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Strepsiades, an old bumbling countryman, wants his son Pheidippides to be educated by Socrates in the techniques of persuasion—in rhetoric—in order that the family might evade the lawsuits brought on by the son's excessive expenditures on horses. When Pheidippides refuses to enroll in Socrates' school, Strepsiades himself decides to attend. The ensuing drama is a conflict of generations, religion (where "Vortex, Clouds, and Tongue" replace Zeus and the traditional gods), and educational theories. The curriculum offered in the Socratic "Thinkery" was rhetoric, the ability to argue a case successfully. This was indeed a useful skill in a city in which political power depended upon success as a speaker in the democratic assembly. In the play, two characters, "Right Argument" and "Wrong Argument," make their cases against and for the teaching of rhetoric and such allied innovative topics as cosmology, biology, and grammar. "Right Argument," a representative of an older generation, insists that education should focus on traditional music and poetry and instill a reverence for established religion and parental authority, as well as a sense of individual and civic honor, probity, and modesty; "Wrong Argument" dispenses entirely with both the traditional content and the moral and civic function of education and insists instead that students should learn clever argument, by which they can exploit conventional beliefs and moral standards in order to win the day. "Wrong Argument," a moral relativist, appeals especially to the young with hints of the pleasures of all manner of dissipation.

Amidst the ribald nonsense, the question emerges: do we study the literary and philosophical works of the past to learn virtue and truth from them, or to utilize them by means of "scientific methodologies" in service of our contemporary concerns and preoccupations? The ideas attributed to Protagoras in Plato's *Theatetes* are similar if more serious than those of "Wrong Argument." He too indicates that absolute truth is unknowable and that rhetoric must be used to determine the truth approximate to each time and place—in other words, "Man is the measure of all things."[2] In the *Republic*, the Platonic Socrates makes a different sort of complaint against the traditional curriculum of the poets propounded by "Right Argument." He describes its practitioners as "imitators of images

of excellence and of the other things" and hence unable to reveal any truth.[3] Poets further undermine their educational value because they appeal to the emotions rather than to reason. Thus Plato snatches truth and virtue away from the jurisdiction of poetry and relocates it in the study of logic and dialectic. Only with these tools is it possible to discover the truth that is absolute and knowable, the truth essential to live a good life both as a citizen and a person.

In American colleges, the golden age of the humanities may have been the time before the Revolution when the fundamental disciplines were Greek, Latin, Hebrew, logic and rhetoric, natural and moral philosophy, metaphysics, and mathematics. This curriculum, like that of Strepsiades and Plato, was designed to produce good men and loyal citizens, but it also offered the training necessary for law, medicine, and theology. In the late 1700s the other liberal arts were introduced, including modern languages and, in some cases, astronomy, physics, and chemistry. By the early 1800s, navigation and surveying had crept in—courses to which we humanists in liberal arts colleges would object today. Next, requirements in the ancient languages became the focus of change. Between 1796 and 1806 Princeton experimented with substituting scientific subjects for the Latin and Greek requirement.[4] In 1796, a student at Union College could take four years of French instead of Greek, although by 1802 French was dropped from the catalog, a change explained by Eliphalet Nott as due to a lack of patronage but that his biographer views as a move to accommodate parents who had a conservative dislike of the revolutionary ideas espoused in that tongue. In this period, however, students attending Union or similar colleges for the most part studied a modified classical curriculum.[5]

Then, in 1827, Nott introduced at Union the preprofessional "Scientific Curriculum" discussed above, which severely limited traditional studies in the humanities and challenged their authority as sufficient education for the contemporary world.[6] These and similar changes elsewhere did not go unremarked upon. In 1828, Jeremiah Day, the president of Yale, affirmed the classical common curriculum and argued that undergraduate colleges should not include discrete professional studies, for

the mission of higher education should be directed to acquiring the arts of living.[7] In 1850, however, Francis Wayland of Brown University lamented that with the traditional curriculum colleges were producing an article for which demand was diminishing.[8] Subsequently, in 1869, Charles Eliot at Harvard challenged the old order head on with a declaration of the value of a broad elective curriculum that could appeal to students' individual abilities and tastes.[9] This new educational order was contrasted with the old in 1890 by the president of DePauw, who said, "Old Education ascribed the virtue to the subject, the New Education ascribes it to the process," thus echoing the Aristophanic debate and foreshadowing later controversies of content versus methodology.[10]

Inside and outside the academy the debate continues today over the proper subject of study in the humanities, the appropriate methodology to carry out that study, and the particular value of studying the humanities. In order to acquire a contemporary perspective on these issues, I asked six undergraduates whether and why they should study the humanities, and where this study should fit into a liberal arts education at an undergraduate residential college.[11] Their answers were inclusive; they did not perceive a split between the transcendent and the pragmatic, nor between the study of texts to comprehend their truths and to master their techniques for their own purposes. Five students—agreeing with "Right Argument"—spoke of the importance of reading the great works of literature, history, and philosophy (both Western and Eastern) in order to answer the perennial questions of mankind that are important for individual and human development: "Literature presents imaginative and exploratory uses of language; reading, talking about, and writing about these uses not only exposes us to different ways of conceiving and expressing human experience, but also requires us to integrate them into our own lives," or, more simply, "The humanities are the only place to turn when we want to study ourselves, to know how and why we live."

Then, sounding more like Protagoras than Plato, they presented a utilitarian argument for the study of the humanities as "language." One said with great assurance, "The most important skill students can learn is taught by the study of literature.

The study of literature is a study of manipulations of language. The humanities, in general, concern themselves with the use of language, teaching us skills like persuasion through reading and writing about novels, philosophical treatises, and historical documents." Another who studies Greek and Latin said that reading these languages had taught her to integrate "symbols (or data) into something meaningful." A third described the critical thinking that is learned through the study of the humanities as a tool that he and other scientists should use in evaluating their research traditions as well as the values and implications of their research projects.

In response to the particular question of the virtue of studying the humanities in a liberal arts college, they viewed the answer as self-evident. Said one, "The only authentic approach to the humanities can occur in a liberal arts college because the institution itself (ideally) is governed by the same belief as the humanities in the importance of dialogue." They stressed that the small classes and seminars on which colleges pride themselves are the breeding grounds for such explorations and creations of language and that "Humanities students at liberal arts colleges emerge having been participants of vigorous discussions about and examinations of texts—how they construct stories or arguments or ideas to form beautiful and convincing works." They noted that the teacher in small classes engages the students so that they are compelled to grasp the difficult messages about thought, experience, and knowledge and averred that this was unlikely to happen in another educational format.

In light of these affirmations, it is difficult to believe that the humanities are considered to be in dire straits. But we regularly hear, even at liberal arts colleges with their long traditions in the humanities, that enrollments are shrinking, that humanities teachers are demoralized, and that students resent studying topics that seem irrelevant to their future careers. Furthermore, the press, members of the government, and academics themselves perceive that the humanities are "suffering from a failure of confidence, of coherence, and particularly of the nerve to defend and disseminate the great traditions of philosophy, literature, and the arts."[12] It is clear to me—as a classicist, faculty member, and dean—that there are, in fact, major problems with

regard to the faculty, students, and curricula that must be addressed so that the humanities can continue to flourish at liberal arts colleges.

THE FACULTY

The students quoted above regard the close interaction of faculty and students in small classes as an essential part of studying the humanities and as one particular virtue of a liberal arts college. This is what we all speak of in our catalogs and mission statements and what we tell prospective students and parents.[13] The students believe that they will be or are engaged in a common learning experience with the faculty in which they read, discuss, and write about significant ideas and texts. Yet while I believe most faculty at liberal arts colleges endorse the ideal, seldom do I hear faculty rejoice in this opportunity—or even discuss it as the activity in which they are engaged. Rather, many perceive themselves as assailed by a variety of forces both internal and external to their institutions that prevent them from fully achieving this ideal.

Primary among these forces are the increased specialization and professionalization of the faculty of liberal arts colleges. Almost all of these faculty have trained at a research university, where specialization is the mode of study. These universities owe much to the vision of Daniel Coit Gilman, the founder of Johns Hopkins, who in the 1870s spoke of creating a university based on a scientific view, emphasizing discovery of knowledge and encouraging narrowly focused research rather than broad learning. This approach, Gilman believed, would provide every scholar "the unique experience of having contributed some tiny brick, however small, to the Temple of Science, the construction of which is the sublimest achievement of man."[14] Students trained in such institutions as Johns Hopkins emerge into the profession as specialists in one area in which they continue to work, for they understand that if they are to be successful they must contribute something new to the discussion, and this requires the close examination of a topic, of learning more about it than is already known. These graduates comprise the pool from which liberal arts colleges hire.

In a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Leonard Cassuto observed that the "most highly professionalized and accomplished graduate students and incoming faculty members that anyone has ever seen are applying for jobs."[15] While one might think the academy would rejoice in this, the truth is otherwise. In the rapid expansion of higher education that occurred between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s, in which the number of Ph.D.'s nearly quadrupled, the ever increasing number of scholars led to a further narrowing of specialties.[16] Because of the sudden collapse of the academic job market in the 1970s, many young scholars who had expected to be employed at major research universities became candidates for jobs at liberal arts undergraduate colleges. The competition for these positions as well as for those at research institutions has led would-be faculty members to present themselves at hiring time not as apprentice scholars, but rather as professionals with publications in hand or detailed plans for their publishing future. Over the years, as more and more of these young scholars have accepted jobs at liberal arts colleges, they have brought with them not only their talent but also the professional mode and expectations acquired in graduate school at research universities. This mode defines excellence in terms of peer-reviewed publications in scholarly journals or with scholarly presses. And the peers are specialists.

This situation has special implications for Liberal Arts I college faculty.[17] It certainly does not mean that these scholars are not good undergraduate teachers; most whom I have known consider their teaching of primary importance, are successful at it, and enjoy it.[18] But there is an underlying tension or sense of dissatisfaction in many of these men and women, who have been trained to locate their definitions of success in scholarly achievements that are necessarily specialized. They begin their new job eager to profess their topic but immediately learn that the special skill of a college teacher is to be able to translate the significance of the topic—presumably of a topic that he or she loves—into a context that is meaningful for the undergraduate. This takes a reorientation of scholarly values, for the details and complexity that are the essence of scholarly work must be put aside and the grand scheme—which as scholars they have

learned to distrust—must be put forward. Furthermore, many in the humanities will not be teaching their particular topics to upper-level students in seminars. Rather, they will teach introductory or core courses with large enrollments that cover a broad area in a brief time and in which they must emphasize not only content but also basic reading and writing skills. Finally, many students may not be planning to continue study in the discipline or may be present only because the course is required. Successfully teaching these students can be both exciting and rewarding, but the constant pressure to publish created by the brutal reality of the job market and the tenure process and the message of the low status of teaching such "service courses" intrude with nagging persistence on the pleasure.

The typical faculty member in the humanities at a liberal arts college must teach not only introductory material but also a wide variety of topics within the discipline—often four to six different courses a year. In addition, the faculty member may be called upon to teach in multidisciplinary general-education programs. Such are the exigencies of small departments and general-education programs. Where generalists are needed, specialists are provided who, upon beginning the job, find themselves called upon immediately to develop a repertoire of courses in areas they may have only briefly or never studied.[19] For example, Union College requires all freshmen to take the Freshman Preceptorial, an intensive reading and writing seminar with a common reading list that is designed to introduce students to varieties of good writing and types of argument. Faculty from across the college teach the course, although almost half come from the humanities. The eclectic reading list, which is arranged in clusters designed to generate discussion, includes works and authors as diverse as the Koran and the Bhagavad Gita, Voltaire and Ibsen, Shakespeare, and Frederick Douglass. Newer faculty, even those in the humanities who are used to teaching primary texts, have been increasingly reluctant to teach the course, not only because of their commitment to their area and to the belief that authority is vested in specialization, but also because of a fear that they will not teach as "well" and hence will be evaluated poorly by their colleagues or the students, which in turn can affect their success in the tenure process.

The problems posed in teaching by specialization do not, however, have the same impact on morale and behavior as those posed by the demand—real and imagined—of remaining a productive scholar in a liberal arts college. As Ernest Boyer noted, "Research per se was not the problem. The problem was that the research mission, which was appropriate for *some* institutions, created a shadow over the entire higher learning enterprise—and the model of a 'Berkeley' or an 'Amherst' became the yardstick by which all institutions would be measured."[20] The inclusion of "Amherst" in Boyer's remark is both notable and ironic. Amherst is a liberal arts college—a wealthy and top-ranked school to be sure, but still a liberal arts undergraduate college and not a research university. Should even an Amherst have the same research expectations as a Berkeley? The question is to a large degree irrelevant, for faculty at the highly selective liberal arts colleges have aligned themselves with the research universities in terms of their research expectations; the rest of the four-year and two-year colleges fall into a group with lesser expectations and demands.[21] This alignment is not unexpected, for the candidate pool for jobs at research universities and Liberal Arts I colleges is the same. It is, however, a fact of critical importance when considering the ethos and self-expectations of Liberal Arts I faculty in the humanities, expectations that run afoul of two major obstacles—time and money.

For professors, the time available for research is to a large degree dependent upon the number of courses they teach. The teaching load at liberal arts colleges is normally higher than that of a research university. The thirty-two schools with which Union College, for example, chooses to compare itself have for the most part teaching loads of five or six courses a year, although a very few—the wealthiest—have a four-course load. Research university faculty, however, may have only three or four courses a year, at least one of which will be in their research area, and they may have graduate assistants to help with grading or to lead discussion sessions of their undergraduate courses. Furthermore, for humanists, the load can be especially time consuming because a number of their courses will be introductory, hence larger and entailing considerable amounts

of graded writing, a time-consuming task. An additional demand upon the time of all liberal arts college faculty is the expectation that they will participate in the intellectual life of the students outside of the classroom with extensive office hours and attendance at language tables, poetry readings, and philosophy colloquia. Many also are regularly asked to talk to student groups, join student-faculty panels, plan trips to museums and theaters, attend student productions, plan film series, and entertain students in their homes.

Money, or its lack, exerts a further pressure upon the scholar-teacher in the humanities. Humanities faculty need funds to support time away from teaching and for travel. Frequently the materials they need for research are not in undergraduate libraries. National Endowment for the Humanities money available for research has been shrinking as scholarly expectations have been rising. Funds for four-year colleges and their affiliated scholars were 13.6 percent of the NEH budget in 1982, 10.5 percent in 1987, and 7.6 percent in 1992. Furthermore, the humanities receive less than 1 percent of all foundation giving—and those amounts, too, are falling. Cumulatively, according to John D'Arms, the total number of fellowships in the humanities awarded by the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Humanities Council, and the Guggenheim Foundation was just over 150 in 1994, a fall of nearly 40 percent from the early 1980s; simultaneously, purchasing power has been seriously eroded.[22] Yet the prevailing university value system, in which personal and institutional legitimacy is obtained predominantly through research activities, has moved full-blown with young scholars to liberal arts colleges, where these scholars must in many cases compete with those at universities who have more time, more money, and more support for obtaining grants.[23]

Scarce money for grants for humanities faculty in liberal arts colleges can also contribute to lower salaries. Frequently salary increases depend upon research productivity, not because teaching is disregarded, but because publications are easier to evaluate in terms of their number and venue and because there are more good teachers than money available for salary allocation. Moreover, the oversupply of job candidates and the undersupply

of jobs, exacerbated by the absence of employment opportunities outside of the academy for humanists, have led to lower starting salaries and a lack of bargaining power. In addition, lower salaries may be attributed to the "feminization" of the humanities (33 percent of the faculty in humanities are women) and to the humanities' position at the forefront of the culture wars, from which they have suffered disproportionate decreases in public funding and support.[24] This salary differential is another source of demoralization for humanities faculties.

The inevitable question arises: should humanists at liberal arts colleges reduce their research expectations? It is not the new Ph.D.'s alone who would argue against this; many faculty trained during or after the 1960s would also agree.[25] In 1969, according to a report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in Liberal Arts I and II colleges traditionally known for their emphasis on teaching 6 percent of the faculty strongly agreed that it was difficult to achieve tenure without publishing. By 1989, the number had risen to 24 percent while another 16 percent agreed with reservations. At the same time, 22 percent considered that the pressure to publish reduced the quality of teaching, but 76 percent agreed either strongly or with reservations that teaching effectiveness should be the primary criterion for promotion. Furthermore, 83 percent indicated that their interests either lay primarily in teaching or leaned toward teaching. When asked what they actually had published, 32 percent reported having published no articles while 42 percent reported having published one to five, and 67 percent had not published a book or monograph, while 30 percent had published one to five. These liberal arts faculty—who, in most cases, create and apply the standards for reappointment, tenure, and promotion—seem to support a reward and status system that is at odds with their primary interests and activity. Thus it is not surprising that over half find their job a source of considerable personal strain and anxiety.[26]

Nevertheless, as both a humanist and a dean of arts and sciences, I believe that research expectations for humanists at liberal arts colleges should be encouraged. In fact, I have become increasingly committed to the idea that liberal arts college faculty must be active scholars, not least because providing re-

search opportunities for faculty makes these colleges appealing to the most competitive job candidates. Equally importantly, scholarship can and does inform teaching in a variety of ways, including exposing the teacher to new ideas, methods, and information. Furthermore, most of us became faculty members because we were intensely interested in our fields and wanted to pursue them; this is an important part of our identity and our happiness. It is as critical to respect and nurture this motivation at a liberal arts college as at a research university, for frequently in a liberal arts college a faculty member will be the only person in his or her area; this makes it easy to suffer not only from intellectual loneliness but also from intellectual sloppiness or even arrogance. By engaging in scholarly activity and submitting work for consideration by their peers, teachers of undergraduates are able to maintain a high level of engagement and performance in their disciplines. Consequently, the administration must find ways to enable faculty to concentrate on their teaching without abandoning their research, and faculty in judging each other must take a broad and generous view of what constitutes appropriate research and productivity. Only in this way will the faculty of liberal arts colleges thrive as teachers and scholars and realize the goals of a liberal arts college education.

STUDENTS

Although the students with whom I spoke clearly expressed a belief in the importance of studying the humanities, they do not appear to be a representative sample. In 1966, humanities degrees were 20.7 percent of the total degrees awarded nationally; by 1993 they were only 12.7 percent. In Liberal Arts II colleges, there was a drop from 26 to 10 percent of the total in the absolute number of humanities B.A.'s, and a corresponding decrease in each of the major humanities disciplines. At Liberal Arts I colleges, however, the total degrees awarded in the humanities dropped only 10 percent, from 40 percent in 1966 to 30 percent in 1993.[27] These statistics must be considered in the context of changing enrollments. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s the numbers of humanities degrees may have been temporarily swollen by the women who attended college in increas-

ing numbers, and who initially chose to study the fields traditionally identified with women.[28]

The most frequently cited scapegoat for this state of affairs is preprofessionlism; students, like faculty, have been soiled by the mundane reality of getting and keeping jobs. In 1993, 85 percent of students reported that they had come to college with a specific career in mind for which they wished to prepare, and more than one-third admitted that, if they thought attending college was not helping their job chances, they would drop out. In 1996, 72 percent said they went to college in order to make more money—an increase of 18 percent since 1976. At the same time, the number of students who reported that they came to college to gain a well-rounded education and to formulate their values and goals declined from 71 to 57 percent. This pattern applies to all groups of students, regardless of age, race, gender, full-time or part-time attendance status, or the type of institution attended. The same careerism is apparent in the choice of majors. Nationally, majors leading to jobs in business, education, and health professions are benefiting; on a liberal arts campus, business and health professions translate into economics, biology, and psychology majors (up 70 percent nationally between 1985–1986 and 1993–1994). Nevertheless, although English, foreign languages, philosophy and religion, and visual and performing arts had all dropped in the number of degrees awarded between 1975–1976 and 1985–1986, they began to recoup their losses between 1985–1986 and 1993–1994.[29]

This preprofessional attitude is moderated, according to Alexander Astin's latest surveys, in students who attend private independent, Protestant, or Roman Catholic colleges, a set that includes Liberal Arts I colleges. These institutions have the strongest "humanities orientation," a measure he defines by the importance given to teaching the classics of Western Civilization, using essay exams, offering general-education courses, and encouraging the use of multiple drafts of written work. Small highly selective colleges exhibit the strongest humanities orientation, whereas the larger, nonselective institutions show the weakest.[30] This is reflected in the frequent inclusion of English among the top three majors at those Liberal Arts I colleges usually regarded as among the most elite.[31] Students'

self-reported increases in both writing and critical-thinking skills also correlate positively with the humanities orientation, while the view that the principal benefit of a college education is to increase one's earning power or to improve job skills correlates negatively. There is also an indirect positive effect of the humanities orientation on self-reported growth in overall academic development and cultural awareness, in preparation for graduate school, listening ability, participation in protests, attending recitals or concerts, liberalism, and a diversity orientation. Clearly, in spite of the prevalence of preprofessional attitudes among the college-bound, liberal arts colleges are in an optimal position to engage students in the study of the humanities.

Even at liberal arts colleges, however, factors other than careerism pose significant and potentially more long-term problems for the humanities. The very styles of learning that seem best suited for today's students are not those of the typical humanities course. Humanities are text-based, but our students, we fear, are losing the ability to read, or as Denis Donoghue writes, "giving up that ability in favor of an easier one, the capacity of being spontaneously righteous, indignant, or otherwise exasperated."[32] The impairment of literacy—and hence verbal expression—becomes an impediment not only in the *reading* of texts but also in the interchange of ideas, both oral and written, that is fundamental to the *teaching* of texts.[33] Furthermore, a study by Charles Schroeder indicates that more than half of today's students perform best in a learning situation characterized by "direct, concrete experience, moderate-to-high degrees of structure, and a linear approach to learning." These students "value the practical and the immediate, and the focus of their perception is primarily on the physical world."[34] Three-quarters of faculty, on the other hand, prefer the global to the particular; are stimulated by the realm of concepts, ideas, and abstractions; and assume that students, like themselves, need a high degree of autonomy in their work.[35] Students prefer concrete subjects and an active mode of learning; faculty prefer abstract subjects and passive learning.[36] The implications for the humanities seem especially significant. No matter how many active and cooperative learning projects we

invent, much of our students' learning must come through reading, a slow and solitary act, and much of our discussion must involve ideas and abstractions.

The mismatch of student learning styles and disciplinary methods in the text-based humanities is apparent in the difficulty humanities faculty and students have in benefiting from the current enthusiasm for undergraduate research. The National Council on Undergraduate Research, the Council on Undergraduate Research, and admissions literature tout such research as the pinnacle of the undergraduate experience. Indeed, active, hands-on learning, with faculty and students working closely together, and not infrequently publishing together, is well suited to the sciences.[37] The social sciences, too, with their emphases on data collection and manipulation, present to students opportunities of discovery and active learning in collaboration with faculty. Furthermore, funding is available for scientists and social scientists to support research with students through National Science Foundation programs such as "Research at Undergraduate Institutions" and "Research Experience for Undergraduates," as well as through student assistantships included in standard research grants.

In the humanities, however, although many students do serious work on senior projects and theses, and although this work entails meetings and discussions with the advisor, most of it is done alone, in reading, taking notes, and writing, and there is seldom external funding available to support either faculty or students. Furthermore, most seniors in the humanities are not able to produce original work because their language skills are inadequate or because they lack sufficient literary, philosophical, historical, or theoretical background. I do not wish to denigrate the achievements of humanities students or faculty; many of us have had wonderful intellectual experiences working with students on their senior theses, and many students have found the experience transformative. But the appeal is not to the scientific method of active discovery that is the model for student learning and undergraduate research today.

CURRICULUM

The humanities curriculum has attracted the most attention in public discussion of problems in higher education. Faculty are held responsible for its perceived disarray and blamed for failing to declare with one voice what students should learn—something that neither fifth-century Athenians nor nineteenth-century Americans could do. On occasion, they are even blamed for the moral breakdown of American society as a whole (which should at least boost the morale of those who think the humanities do not receive proper recognition of their centrality).[38]

Certainly, the curricula in the humanities have changed since the 1960s, and the increased discussion of literary theory and the politics of multiculturalism, the causes of most controversy, have contributed to this. Most noticeable is the tremendous increase in course offerings with a shift in course descriptions away from period or genre to thematic topics, the inclusion of interdepartmental and interdisciplinary programs, a globalization of the curriculum, and the proliferation of course offerings pertaining to minority populations, ethnic groups, and women and gender-related issues.[39] The average number of undergraduate courses listed in catalogs has increased by a factor of almost five since 1914 and almost doubled between 1964 and 1993; but this trend has been especially pronounced in the humanities where, with all types of institutions counted together, in 1914 there were an average of 156 courses in the humanities; in 1939, 263 courses; in 1964, 394; and in 1993, 788. This contrasts with mathematics and the natural sciences where the change between 1914 and 1993 was from 106 to 293.

An increase in course offerings does not, however, indicate the degree of true curricular change. The proliferation has had little effect upon majors in the humanities, for the new courses have not replaced the traditional required offerings, but rather have been added as electives.[40] Furthermore, in reading descriptions of majors in college catalogs, it appears that there are few schools in which new theoretical approaches are actually shaping programs. As Francis Oakley points out, "The bulk of the critical commentary on the current state of teaching in the humanities—frequently characterized by sweeping and sensa-

tionalist claims and a species of disheveled anecdotalism—has been based on what is supposed to be going on at probably no more than a dozen of the nation's leading research universities and liberal arts colleges."[41]

The increased number of courses, however, has made the designation of general education or core requirements a more contentious issue—an issue that often thwarts the development of general-education curricula entirely. This situation is the result both of a changing world and of an uncertainty about priorities in teaching the humanities. First, in an environment that is increasingly multicultural and global in orientation and experience and in which knowledge is expanding in all areas, it is difficult to set dates or geographical boundaries on the content of the humanities, or to ignore the interactions between the curriculum and the changing social, moral, political, and economic structures of society. Just as the introduction of French at Union in 1796 and its deletion in 1802 reflected social and political realities, so do current topics and emphases. Today enrollments are soaring nationally in Spanish and Chinese—both of which have a pragmatic appeal and an immediacy for our students—while those in Russian, French, and German are either barely maintaining their hold or falling.[42] Greater numbers of women and minorities are attending colleges, and courses that address their concerns and locate them within the intellectual conversation are flourishing. Second, today's students expect to study the humanities as a way to discover the "other," as well as to uncover shared values. Finally, we cannot with any degree of intellectual honesty refuse to recognize the existence of new methodologies for studying texts any more than we can refuse to recognize new techniques in science.

The inevitability of curricular change in a changing world appears to have uncoupled three obligations that traditionally motivated many humanities faculty. The first is to teach students those works that we regard as significant in our field, the works that have created our disciplinary traditions and, in many cases, our intellectual environment; the second is to teach ways of reading or methods of interpretation that will enable our students to make reasoned aesthetic, philosophical, or political judgments about texts; and the third is to engage students

through consideration of verbal and visual texts in an exploration of universal human questions and concerns. The increased number of texts available to teach and the explosion of a variety of critical theories and approaches seem to present us with a series of choices that necessitate making significant decisions about literature and language, culture, and politics, and, in fact, about ourselves as scholars. Fortunately, as faculty teaching undergraduates in the humanities know, we can take the inclusive view that a course exists and that learning takes place not through the composition of a reading list or the explanation of a theoretical approach, but through the interactions of the teacher, the students, and the text. "Great works" can be taught from subversive perspectives, perspectives that make immediate what seems antique; "alternative" works can be taught "traditionally;" and few classes take place without at least oblique comments upon the basic human condition. Moreover, just as Aristophanes dramatizes opposing arguments, we should, to borrow Gerald Graff's phrase, "teach the conflict," for it is in responding to and evaluating alternative models and texts that students discover the excitement, urgency, and value of the humanities.

Most research on the state of the humanities in liberal arts colleges focuses on the degrees granted, that is, the number of majors. Naturally, faculty want majors in their departments not only because they wish to teach upper-level courses but also because they consider their subjects to be of great interest and hence worthy of study in depth. Yet, if humanists truly believe what they profess—that study in the humanities is an essential element in the creation of "educated persons," that it is important for the development of individuals apart from their professional training, that it enables people to lead their lives with an understanding of themselves and others, with rational purpose and sympathetic response—they must take general-education curricula or distribution requirements seriously, for they have been and will continue to be the way most liberal arts college students encounter the humanities.

Yet humanists have failed to convince their colleagues of the importance of general education for all undergraduate students. In 1914, an average of 55 percent of credits necessary to

earn a B.A. were taken within the general-education requirement; in 1939, it was 48 percent; in 1964, 46 percent; and in 1993, 33 percent.[43] This occurred in spite of the Carnegie Foundation's 1977 report that declared general education a "disaster area."[44] Furthermore, general-education programs usually exist within a college as orphans without a department, budget, or dedicated faculty advocates. Faculty convey this low status both directly and indirectly to students, who perceive general-education courses as something that should be "gotten out of the way" before embarking on the serious project of the major. Humanists, therefore, must put aside their distaste for teaching students who are in classes because they are required to be, finding ways to engage them in these subjects and leading them to recognize the importance of such study. They must also put aside the arguments over content that frequently prevent the implementation of general-education courses in the humanities, and create coherence in the discussion that arises from inclusiveness. It is not, according to Astin's research, the formal curricular content and structure that determine how students approach and how faculty deliver general-education courses but the extent to which students interact with student peers, and the extent to which students interact with faculty. These are the types of interactions that can be fostered in the discussion format of humanities classrooms in small liberal arts colleges and that can attract students to our disciplines.[45]

Union College, a Liberal Arts I college with an enrollment of slightly over two thousand students, illustrates the resilience of the humanities. The school has a strong and unabashedly professional engineering program, a long history of strength in the sciences, and did not become coeducational until 1970. Yet both the humanities orientation Astin identifies with liberal arts colleges and the power of a general-education program to attract more students to the humanities are demonstrated in our enrollment patterns. The curriculum, a modified core introduced in 1988–1989 that promotes the idea that context is necessary for understanding, requires that, in addition to a Freshman Preceptorial, all students enroll in an ancient, European, or American "history sequence." Within each sequence, students take two history surveys and two aligned courses, one

of which must be in literature. In addition, students must take three language courses, or three courses dealing with a non-Western culture, or participate in a term abroad. Many of these courses are also in the humanities. Significant enrollment increases that can be directly attributed to the general-education program have occurred in history, classics, and modern languages. The overall increase in humanities enrollments is 10 percent.[46] Furthermore, since the introduction of the general-education program, majors in the humanities (including history), which had fallen to a low of 14 percent in 1988, have risen to 21 percent in 1998, which just exceeds the high of 1969.[47]

In the conclusion of the *Clouds*, Pheidippides, who eventually learned the technique of clever argument, attempts to convince Strepsiades that it is proper for the son to beat the father. Strepsiades, not surprisingly, rejects the newfangled learning and gods and falls upon Socrates' school with ax and torch. Although vigorous attacks upon new methodologies are not unknown among humanists today, the use of brute force obviously undermines our claim that studying the humanities encourages us to act with rational purpose and to enter into understandings with others that acknowledge difference while reaching for a commonality. Consequently, we must find our inspiration not in the *Clouds*, but nearer at hand—even, I dare propose, in the current situation of the humanities at liberal arts colleges. We can note the slowly increasing number of students in our courses, the positive effects that general-education programs can have on majors, the excitement and interest generated by new texts and approaches, and, most importantly, the persistent belief of a number of students in liberal arts colleges that it is important to study the humanities. Nevertheless, we must continue to make our case for the humanities not only to the public but also to our colleagues in other disciplines. We need to realize that the preprofessionalism of the students mirrors our own careerism, and we must through our own attitudes reassert and sustain for all students the significance of the humanities. The strong presence of the humanities in general-education programs is one means of doing this. General education acts as a prism for the goals of the humanities; through a

multiplicity of formats, it introduces students to a conversation that encourages young people to formulate a conception of the good that transcends their specific, if honorable, utilitarian ends, and begins for them the process of answering and re-answering the questions that confound us. And it is in the discussion of verbal and visual texts in the humanities classrooms of liberal arts colleges that the potential for this sort of learning most obviously resides.

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ENDNOTES

[1]Codman Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 223.

[2]Plato *Theatetes* 152A1.

[3]Plato *Republic* 600E.

[4]Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 131.

[5]Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 114–116, and T. G. McFadden, "Introduction," *Laws of Union College* (Schenectady, N.Y.: Friends of Union College, 1998). Freshmen studied Latin, Greek, and English languages, arithmetic, and elocution; sophomores, geography, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, surveying, navigation, and logic; juniors, Kames' elements of criticism, astronomy, higher mathematics, and natural and moral philosophy; and seniors, ancient and modern history, Locke, philosophy, Virgil, Cicero, and Horace.

[6]Hislop, *Eliphalet Nott*, 227.

[7]"The Yale Report of 1828," in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, ed. Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 2:275–291.

[8]Francis Wayland, "Report to the Brown Corporation, 1850," in Hofstadter and Smith, eds., *American Higher Education*, 478.

[9]Charles William Eliot, "Inaugural Address as President of Harvard, 1869," in Hofstadter and Smith, eds., *American Higher Education*, 601–624.

[10]Lucas, *American Higher Education*, 169.

[11]Ann Blankman (English), Tania Magoon (Biology and Classics), Courtney Randall (English), Jeremy Newell (English), Eve Sorum (English), and Eric von Wettberg (Biology).

[12]George Levine et al., *Speaking for the Humanities*, American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper, No. 7 (New York: ACLS, 1989), 2; for a longer discussion of the woes of liberal education see Francis Oakley, "Discontents in American Higher Education," in *The Politics of Liberal Education*, ed. L. Darryl, J. Gless, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), 267–289.

[13]"Third, the College believes that the close relationship between its faculty and students motivates students to learn," mission statement from the *Union College Academic Register,* 1997–1998.

[14]"G. Stanley Hall Describes Gilman's Policies at the Hopkins in the 1880's," in Hofstadter and Smith, eds., *American Higher Education*, 650. On the necessity of specialization, see Levine et al., *Speaking for the Humanities*, 5–8.

[15]Leonard Cassuto, "Pressures to Publish Fuel the Professionalization of Today's Graduate Students," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 November 1998, B4–B5.

[16]National Research Council, *Summary Report 1986: Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987), 78.

[17]According to the Carnegie classification, Liberal Arts I colleges are primarily undergraduate, highly selective institutions that award more than half of their baccalaureate degrees in arts and science fields. Liberal Arts II colleges are less selective and award more than half of their degrees in liberal arts fields.

[18]For a similar perspective, see Oakley, "Discontents in American Higher Education," 275.

[19]Bruce Kuklick, "The Emergence of the Humanities," in Darryl, Gless, and Smith, eds., *Politics of Liberal Education*, 201–212.

[20]Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton, N.J.: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990), 12.

[21]Oakley, "Discontents in American Higher Education," 276, and endnote 10; and Levine et al., *Speaking for the Humanities*, 28–29.

[22]John H. D'Arms, "Funding Trends in the Academic Humanities," in *What's Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Alvin Kernan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 38–41.

[23]On the function of research in the university, see Jonathan R. Cole, "Balancing Acts: Dilemmas of Choice Facing Research Universities," *Dædalus* 122 (4) (Fall 1993): 23–24.

[24]Lynn Hunt, "Democratization and Decline? The Consequences of Demographic Change in the Humanities," in Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* 17–31, esp. 20–21. She reports average humanities salaries in 1993–1994 as $41,038 in foreign languages, $41,346 in English, $43,489 in

philosophy and religion, and $45,337 in history, versus $44,390 in mathematics, $45,000 in physics, and $52,660 in economics.

[25]William J. Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984), quoting Dean Robert Berdahl of the University of Oregon, 17.

[26]Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Tables A-1, A-5, A-6, A-23, A-30, A-31.

[27]Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* 247 and Figure 7.

[28]Oakley, "Discontents in American Higher Education," 280–281.

[29]Arthur Levine and Jeanette S. Cureton, *When Hope and Fear Collide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 115–133.

[30]Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 45.

[31]For example, Amherst, Bowdoin, Pomona, Swarthmore, Oberlin, Carleton, Grinnell, Smith, Wellesley, and Bryn Mawr as listed in *The Princeton Review: The Best 311 Colleges*, ed. E. T. Custard et al. (New York: Random House, 1999). The other two most popular majors vary among biology, history, economics, political science, and psychology.

[32]Denis Donoghue, "The Practice of Reading," in Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* 123; see also Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996), 133.

[33]See Leon Botstein, "Damaged Literacy: Illiteracies and American Democracy," *Dædalus* 119 (2) (Spring 1990): 55–84.

[34]Charles Schroeder, "New Students—New Learning Styles," *Change* (September/October 1993): 25.

[35]Arthur Levine and Jeanette S. Cureton, "Colleagiate Life: An Obituary," *Change* (May/June 1998): 17; see also Levine and Cureton, *When Hope and Fear Collide*, 128–130.

[36]Levine and Cureton, *When Hope and Fear Collide*, 128.

[37]For example, between 1994 and 1997, Union students in the basic sciences authored or coauthored with faculty forty-eight poster and paper presentations at regional, national, and international conferences, and coauthored with faculty forty-one articles in refereed journals.

[38]Levine et al., *Speaking for the Humanities*, 2.

[39]For more specific data see Oakley, "Ignorant Armies and Nighttime Clashes," in Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* 71.

[40]See Levine et al., *Speaking for the Humanities*, 19.

[41]Oakley, "Ignorant Armies," 65; for an examination of a curriculum strongly influenced by theoretical approaches, see Margery Sabin, "Evolution and Revolution," in Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* 84–101.

[42]Between 1990 and 1995 enrollments in Spanish rose 13.5 percent (an increase of 72,000 students) and in Chinese 35.8 percent; in Russian they fell 44.6

percent, German 27.8 percent, and French 24.6 percent. "Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education," Modern Language Association, Fall 1995.

[43]National Association of Scholars, *The Dissolution of General Education: 1914–1993* (Princeton, N.J.: National Association of Scholars, 1996), Figure 1.1, p. 5.

[44]Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Missions of the College Curriculum* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977).

[45]Astin, *What Matters in College?* 424.

[46]Enrollments in Humanities at Union:

Year	Arts	Cls	Eng	His	ML	Phil	Total Hum	Total Enroll	% of Total Enroll
1978	673	326	1485	1217	987	499	5,187	17,458	30%
1988	970	415	1739	1397	1057	787	6,365	19,181	33%
1995	1035	526	1737	1981	1444	600	7,323	18,453	40%

[47]Degrees Awarded at Union:

Year	Arts	Cls	Eng	His	ML	Phil	Hum	Total	% of All Degrees	
1969	8	0	17	27	6	0	3	61	20%	(302)
1978	4.5	1	25	23.5	20	7	5	86	16%	(536)
I988	3.5	3	26.5	13.5	11	7	9	73.5	14%	(536)
1998	22	4.5	31.5	25.5	15.5	6	0	105	21%	(492)

Departments awarding the most degrees at Union in 1969 were Science (35), Political Science (30), History (27), and Electrical Engineering (22) ; in 1978, Political Science (48), Biology (44), Electrical Engineering (53), and Mechanical Engineering (51); in 1987, Political Science (61), Mechanical Engineering (61), Electrical Engineering (76), and Economics (44); in 1998, Psychology (77), Biology (57.5), Political Science (52.5), and Economics (48).