

Fighting Systems Failure with a Quiet Revolution

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What is humanistic scholarship for? I believe scholarship is an act of love for the world, and as such, for many people it functions as an *intrinsic* good. But we've got compelling *instrumental* answers as well. Communication across cultural difference, learning about how the world works and has worked, the cultivation of imagination, critical thinking about things we take for granted, good judgment of truth and falsity, collaboration, and responsive awareness of our obligations to humans, animals, and the world locally and globally: these are habits that underpin our best collective life – and they are also the habits fostered by good humanistic teaching and scholarship. If we want to address the challenges of our time, from inequality to authoritarianism – we need them as much as we need good data and sensible policies.

But academic humanistic study is struggling to survive. In the United States, no matter how you slice and dice the numbers, with a few disciplinary exceptions (creative writing, linguistics and communications), and a *very* few institutional exceptions (like Arizona State), undergraduate enrollments are flat or falling everywhere.

A few numbers. In the mid 1970s, between 2500 and 3000 jobs were advertised in the MLA Job List. By the end of the 1980s, that number had increased to nearly 4000 posts per year. The financial crisis of the late 80s led to a sharp drop, but with the economic recovery, the numbers increased again, beating out the 1970s highs...until the crash of 2008-9. The total number of posts fell abruptly from about 3500 in 2008 to 2000 posts just two years later. Numbers have fallen further since. Just under 1,600 jobs were posted in 2019; in 2020, just over 1400. For the first time since the 1970s, when these numbers were first tracked, faculty lines have not grown as the economy recovered.

The 2008 crash also brought down the majors count. And once again, for the first time in history, while the economy has improved – especially for the wealthiest Americans, virtually all of whose kids go to college – most humanities and social science

numbers have not. Louis Menand summarized the situation in the *New Yorker*: “between 2012 and 2019, the number of BAs awarded annually in English fell by twenty-six per cent, in philosophy and religious studies by twenty-five per cent, and in foreign languages and literature by twenty-four per cent. In English, according to the Association of Departments of English...research universities like Brown and Columbia took the biggest hits.” Just eight per cent of students entering Harvard in 2021 reported that they intend to major in the arts and humanities; not long ago that number was close to twenty percent. In the most recent Humanities Indicators report, the takeaway is this: we’ve seen a 25 percent drop in majors over the past 15 years, tracked by plummeting numbers in full time faculty hiring. So that’s what’s falling. So is public respect.

What else is growing, according to Humanities Indicators? Public interest in our material – in history, culture, religion, rhetoric, philosophy, art, video, politics, and so on. What’s also growing is public suspicion that humanistic disciplines and the scholarship that underpins them is biased, politicized, and irrelevant.

What’s also growing in the research-intensive institutions that produce nearly all the nation’s humanities and qualitative social science PhDs is the pressure on graduate students and faculty to publish specialized scholarship in what I think of as the PDF-able form.

American academia is a diverse, dynamic system offering many paths of entry to students and scholars from all walks of life over the world. It is also a brutally unequal hierarchy where a few institutions possess most of the resources and whose faculty establish norms that exert powerful influence across the whole system. Eighty percent of the PhDs who took their degrees at and who now work in an American university were trained at just twenty percent of the 368 universities that grant nearly all the nation’s doctorates. Five institutions – the University of California-Berkeley, Harvard, University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Stanford – produced one in eight US-trained faculty working in the country today.¹ Bear this in mind as I continue.

¹ K. Hunter Wapman, Sam Zhang, Aaron Clauset, and Daniel Larremore, “Quantifying hierarchy and dynamics in US faculty hiring and retention,” *Nature*, vol. 610 (2022), 119-127 (see 119-120).

We have entered a “post-normal” situation, as Richard Gallagher said yesterday. But all is not lost – if we – the people in this room – can determine what we can do together that we cannot do alone – if we can agree on the action steps we need to take to lift up what I see as a quiet revolution in humanistic scholarship that has developed over the past 25 years.

Let me spend a few minutes on that.

First and most importantly for us as a group, scholars are exploring **new ways to circulate knowledge**, including multimedia publications, graphic novels, team-written essays, video games, work that incorporates creative writing or memoir.

Second, especially among the emerging generation of scholars, I see an uptick in **scholar-activism**: for example, research on voter turnout that includes getting out the vote, or research into environmental problems that incorporates community-driven proposals: this work is often undertaken by teams of undergraduates or graduates working with faculty.

Third, **community-engaged research**, where scholars work directly with many different people: speakers of indigenous languages, communities eager to understand their pasts, people trying to imagine a better world – and also scholars in other departments and disciplines.

Fourth, **comparative, transnational, transregional, and transtemporal scholarship**, which frames questions at the margins or on the borders of states. Such projects compare the “I” in a lyric poem written in Uzbekistan with one in Sao Paulo, or concepts of criminal justice in ancient Assyria and China, or economic developments in agrarian cultures across the global south.

You will have noted that these four directions are difficult or impossible to pursue in isolation. They involve acts of co-creation. Anyone who has done this work can tell you about its enormously generative effects – often unpredictable and difficult to contain within the seminar timetable or the traditional disciplinary graduate seminar or the semester calendar. All four of these directions, and their emphasis on collaboration, relationality, and context, have the potential (and often do) respond constructively to the

critique of the European thought-world made by scholars like the eminent theorist and critic Sylvia Wynter, who points out that “our present arrangements of knowledge were put in place in the nineteenth century” to serve the interests of imperialist Europe.

Scholars have been doing this work for decades. But for many reasons, much of it – work that is collaborative or written in the vernacular or expresses itself in activity beyond peer reviewed publications – tends to run into problems when it encounters the rules and habits of the university as it is currently institutionalized.

Among the most prestigious institutions in the world, the ones that produce 80% of the PhDs, faculty research productivity, which means peer reviewed books and articles, PDF-able work. Books and articles are the basis of the faculty reward structure. Books are celebrated by their authors, home institutions, and the presses; they fit into well-established fellowship and grant competitions and are nominated for well-known awards.

Faculty doing alternative forms of scholarship face a constant struggle. These four modes of scholarship, highly varied in outcome, are difficult to capture and publicize within the frame of a book-centered culture. A multi-year study published in 2008 showed that across the country, R-1 policy on tenure and promotion discouraged public scholarship, publicly oriented scholarship, and participation in the work of public humanities.²

Beyond the reward structure, the secondary status of alternative scholarship is harming current and future undergraduates, growing numbers of whom are turning to humanities majors that fall under the public umbrella by combining the study of history, culture, language, or philosophy with policy, internships, or social justice work. The available programs at all levels of study offering cross-training opportunities, including masters and doctoral programs, remains very small in every discipline except history.³ These low enrollments, to reiterate a point I made earlier, lead to cuts in faculty

² See Julie Ellison and Tim Eatman, “Scholarship in public: knowledge creation and tenure policy in the engaged university,” *Imagining America* 16 (<https://surface.syr.edu/ia/16>).

³ Sources include resources published by the American Historical Association, the National Council on Public History, *Imagining America*, and Humanities Indicators.

numbers, which speeds up the spiral of decline toward reductions in hiring and graduate fellowship lines or even department closure. When the pandemic began, to take the example of public scholarship, these programs were among the first on the budget chopping block, because they were viewed as extras, not core to the research and teaching mission of the university. Hence the swift decision of the NEH to create the large rescue fund that supported the Sustaining Public Engagement Grants.

Last week, the NEH staff was cut by half, many of its grants terminated midstream. When and while we rebuild, we need to rebuild the right way – not go back to what we knew before but seize the opportunity to recognize the quiet revolution.

Because we're losing. Losing creative scholars, scholars of color, women, scholars who were first in their families to go to college, scholars from poor families, and immigrant scholars. These people feel pressured not only to produce ever more specialized knowledge, but to do so in isolation and in an artificial language that limits their audience and impact. Worse, it demands they assimilate themselves into structures designed to perpetuate worldviews in which they are marginal, excluded, or devalued. As the Stanford scholar Sylvia Wynter would say, the distinctive contributions of minoritized perspectives and discourses risk being lost. The limited forms of acceptable scholarly expression build walls between scholars and the communities they hope to reach – putting beyond their reach the world they are trying to build in common.

This is why we at ACLS are working on how to accelerate acceptance of plurality in scholarship: a plural approach to defining what counts in the production and circulation of knowledge – one that takes seriously the goals of inclusive world-making and transformation on a global scale, rather than one that imitates the national and linguistic divisions of the world.

This means thinking differently about doctoral education, the requirements for tenure and promotion, the forms scholarship is permitted to take, and the shape of the scholarly groupings in the university. We are asking ourselves tough questions about the rationale behind the ever-higher value being placed on highly specialized research while our undergraduate and public audiences diminish.

This is why in 2021 ACLS applied for and won a \$3.5 million grant from the NEH to support publicly engaged scholarship. From 2021 to 2023, the award funded twenty-four established programs facing closure or significant budget cuts thanks to the financial pressures created by the Covid-19 pandemic. The twenty-four programs are organized and operated by people across many sectors of the economy, including community centers, non-profit arts and activist groups, prisons, assisted living facilities, together with faculty and staff employed at a wide range of institutions of higher education, from highly selective, wealthy research universities to resource-constrained community colleges. Key to each project is the public presentation of the knowledge gained, online or in person. Most teams hope to reach new audiences, particularly among people underserved by and underrepresented in the academy, many of whom see the college or university as unknown or intimidating territory.

What the quiet revolution requires, if the humanities are to make their best possible contribution to future life, is recognition and integration. As much as it needs greater public visibility, public scholarship needs a clearly articulated place in the mission, reward structure, and fundamental processes of the academic humanities. Too often, it is dismissed or ignored, particularly in the most prestigious and influential universities.

This situation urgently needs redressing, not only to honor good work, but to help tell a more compelling story about the value of humanistic inquiry, one that convincingly presents the humanities as essential resources for understanding and improving our world. In a moment when the value of humanistic study in American higher education is being publicly questioned, this is the story we should be shouting from the rooftops.

So my question to you: how can we work together to change this world? How can we build a stronger platform from which to speak to the powers that scrutinize, evaluate, and these days, all too often, reduce funding to the academy? We can help decide the academy's fate together, with a plural but united voice of advocacy.

What can we do together that we cannot do alone? How can disciplinary societies, institutions, publishers, and librarians save humanistic expertise? This, I argue, is the

urgent question that we need to address together through bold, canny strategizing for action.