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A Newsletter for Faculty  
Development in the UNC  
Asheville Humanities Program

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## The Continuing Crisis

There has been increasing discussion in this country and abroad about whether the Humanities are still valued. A crisis in funding, combined with a view that only business or science are really important, put the continued health of the Humanities under threat. We all have reason to be interested in this conversation. Here are a couple of recent contributions to the discussion:

Martha C. Nussbaum  
from "Skills for Life"

*The Times Literary Supplement* April 30, 2010

We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. I do not mean the global economic crisis that began in 2008; I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, but is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a worldwide crisis in education.

Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful, docile, technically trained machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements.

What are these radical changes? The humanities and the arts are being cut away, in both primary/secondary and college/university education, in virtually every nation of the world. Seen by policymakers as useless frills, at a time when nations must discard all useless things in order to stay competitive in the global market, they are rapidly losing their place in curricula, and also in the minds and hearts of parents and children. What we might call the humanistic aspects of science and social science -the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought -are also losing ground as nations prefer to pursue short-term profit by the cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills suited to profit-making. . . .

How is education for democratic citizenship doing in the world today? Poorly, I fear. It is still doing reasonably well in the place where I first studied it, namely the liberal arts portion of US college and university curricula. This part of the curriculum, in institutions such as my own, still attracts generous philanthropic support, as rich people remember with pleasure the time when they read books that they loved, and pursued issues open-endedly. During the recent economic crisis, we have even seen an increase in commitment, as charitable donors who value the humanities dig deeper in order to preserve what they love.

It is possible to argue, indeed, that the liberal arts portion of college and university education in the US now supports democratic citizenship better than it did fifty years ago, when students learnt little about the world outside Europe and North America, or about minorities in their own nation. New areas of study, infused into liberal arts courses for all students, have enhanced their understanding of non-Western nations, of the global economy, of race relations, of the dynamics of gender, of the history of migration and the struggles of new groups for recognition and equality. Young people these days rarely leave college as ignorant about the non-Western world as students of my own generation routinely were. Similar changes have taken place in the teaching of literature and the arts: students are exposed to a far wider range of materials, and their "inner eyes" are cultivated by being exposed to the experiences of people of many different types, both within their own nation and abroad.

We cannot be complacent, however. Despite continued support from donors, the economic crisis has led many universities to make deep cuts in humanities and arts programming. Other areas have also had to make cuts, to be sure. But the humanities are widely perceived as inessential, so it seems fine for them to be downsized, and for some departments to be eliminated completely. Even where cuts do not threaten whole departments, they threaten the health of departments, since they mean that vacancies are not filled, and faculty who remain become overworked and unable to do their job well. . . .

Keith Thomas  
from "What are Universities For?"  
*The Times Literary Supplement*, May 7, 2010

[Thomas is mostly concerned with a new British system for funding research in the Humanities. STEM means Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.]

. . . the position of non-STEM subjects is seriously threatened. In this country, the arts and humanities are allocated only 2.8 per cent of the national science and research budget. Across the globe, the situation is even more alarming. A third of the world's learned articles in arts and humanities come from the UK. In many other countries the humanities have scarcely any place. In the developing nations, subjects like law, medicine, information technology and business studies attract the ambitious student. It is in science and technology that the universities of China aspire to lead the world; and the much-cited Shanghai Jiao Tong World Ranking of Universities is based on criteria which take no account of the humanities at all.

Humane scholarship is a vital activity, for without it we would quickly relapse into ignorant solipsism, with no knowledge of past or comprehension of other languages and cultures. We need scholars to resist the annihilation of our intellectual inheritance, to expose myths and to remind us that there are other ways of thinking and acting than those with which we are familiar. Not all such work can be described as "research". When scientists do research, they aim to find out things which have never been known. But much activity in the humanities is concerned to rediscover and re-interpret what once was known but has subsequently been forgotten. A better word for this is "scholarship", with its emphasis less on new knowledge than on fresh understanding. . . .

The humanities offer an indispensable antidote to the vices which inevitably afflict a democratic, capitalist society. They counter the dumbing down of the media by asserting the complexity of things; and they challenge the evasiveness and mendacity of politicians, by placing a premium on intellectual honesty. They also, as Martha Nussbaum emphasized, foster critical thinking about all forms of authority. Soviet Russia and modern China remind us that obsessive concentration on science and technology can be accompanied by indifference to human freedom.

Universities have always served the needs of society and should continue to do so. But those needs go beyond mere economic success. Until the last century, learning was advanced by cultivated members of the leisured class and by those scholars and scientists who managed to obtain some form of patronage. Some original scholarship still takes place outside academia, notably in the field of biography. But the universities have become the chief promoters of that quintessentially human activity, inquiry for inquiry's sake. They cherish science and mathematics as life-enhancing pursuits, regardless of any practical application they may have; and they nourish the humanities, which, by increasing our understanding of art, literature, music, history, religion and philosophy, make our existence more intelligible, more meaningful and more enjoyable.

Governments are right to devote resources to ensuring the people's economic prosperity and physical health. But those goods are not ends in themselves. As Sir Joshua Reynolds once remarked, "Commerce is the means, not the end of happiness or pleasure: the end is a rational enjoyment of life, by the means of arts and sciences". Or, as A. E. Housman wrote: "A life spent, however victoriously, in securing the necessaries of life is no more than elaborate furnishing and decoration of apartments for the reception of a guest who is never to come". We cannot determine the purpose of universities without first asking, "What is the purpose of life?"

**For further reading:**

Marjorie Perloff, "Crisis In The Humanities" <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/articles/crisis.html>  
Stanley Fish, "Crisis of the Humanities II"

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/18/crisis-of-the-humanities-ii/>

Daniel Born, "What Is the Crisis in the Humanities?" <http://thecommonreview.org/article/article/what-is-the-crisis-in-the-humanities.html>

James Seaton, "Defending the Humanities" [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/good\\_society/v017/17.2.seaton.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/good_society/v017/17.2.seaton.html)

. . . **But there's Good News, too**

**Reading groups:** this semester NEH \$\$\$ have funded reading groups on *The Complete Tragedies of Aeschylus*; David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*; Nella Larsen's *Passing* and W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*; and Jacobean tragedies by Webster and Tourneur. Any ideas for further reading groups are welcome!

We've co-sponsored several **speakers** and are in process of arranging future visits by Patricia Crone, of Princeton; poet Natasha Trethewey; Renaissance specialist Ronald Herzman; and writer on ancient

archeology Cathy Gere, for spring 2011 and the 2011-2012 academic year.

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