

A MANIFESTO FOR THE HUMANITIES



The Humanities dare to devote themselves to the examination of what it means to be a human being. In the words of the Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities, these academic disciplines “reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of a world in which irrationality, despair, loneliness, and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope, and reason.”

Traditionally, the Humanities include language, literature, history, philosophy, the study of religion and the study of the fine arts. These disciplines help individuals “come to grips with the question of what living is for.” Moreover, the civic and historical knowledge and ethical reasoning that the humanities develop are prerequisites for informed participation in a free democracy. The complexity and diversity of the human experience across time and place means that those who seek to describe and understand it must develop a vocabulary of interpretation, strategies for accommodating complexity, and protocols for evaluating contested ideas.

The disciplines of the Humanities employ different techniques for grappling with the challenges of articulating the human experience. Some emphasize the discovery and verification of facts as the foundation of interpretive analysis; others lean heavily on the cultivation of empathetic understanding; some examine claims to a comprehensive truth; some stress the cultivation of ethical reasoning in pursuit of moral insight; and others seek self expression and critical appreciation of the pursuit of beauty.

Despite their differences, all of the disciplines of the Humanities impart to students essential knowledge, concepts, and methods that serve as tools and strategies for understanding and evaluating the human condition. Thus there is much that binds the Humanities disciplines together. Each provides its students with means for making the implicit explicit. Each seeks to preserve the languages and stories that reveal the collective memory of cultures. Each involves, in one way or another, the creation and study of texts. Each instills in its practitioners and students methods for critical evaluation of theories and ideas. Each requires disciplined practice in the arts of articulation and dialogue.

In a time when value is often associated solely with the ability to generate economic profit, the Humanities are in danger of being undervalued. But the skills, values, and insights the Humanities impart are essential for a disciplined and inquisitive mind, as well as for a civil society based on mutual respect. As important as the pursuit of technical and scientific expertise undoubtedly is, such a pursuit must go hand in hand with the aims of the Humanities. To deny the very necessary and beneficial relationship between them by neglecting the Humanities is tantamount to cutting the river off from its source.

Individuals cannot do without the tools and strategies of the Humanities, nor can democratic societies, because rational contestation and interpretation present difficulties for us both as individuals and as a society. Through the preservation of the Humanities we extend the long tradition of addressing and containing the burden of human and social complexity, and of seeking better ways to fulfill this complexity. Together the Humanities establish the foundation for lives of reflection, empathy, critical thinking and meaningful conversation. It has been true since ancient times, and it remains true in our time, that without these traits human life is impoverished. Without these things, we become mere specialists lacking vision, mere consumers without heart. Without these things the preservation of a democratic republic is imperiled.

English - Foreign Languages & Literature - Graduate Liberal Studies - History - Philosophy & Religion

