

Specialization is not the problem

Last month, a cloud of doom shadowed the humanities: it seemed that undergraduates were turning away in droves. No longer. Having more carefully examined the numbers, participants in [“the summer of humanities debates”](#) have discovered there actually was no alarming decline in undergraduate humanities degrees.

This discovery has not brought an end to crisis talk, however. Instead, one senses a shift in target from undergraduate curricula to graduate education and a constellation of issues surrounding expert status, including the nebulous issue of reputation. The humanities lack respect, commentators fear, and scholarly emphasis on research specialization is largely to blame.

To make such a claim, we argue, is to confuse the problem of specialization with that of audience. As all students of media should know, knowledge cannot be controlled from its point of production. Colleges and universities provide specialized training of ever-increasing variety. They should not behave as if any discipline, or narrow set of disciplines, could secure a general education for all comers. Nor, in practice, do they. Yet discussion of the humanities crisis continues to strike that chord for a broader audience.

Michael Bérubé’s [recent Chronicle of Higher Education column](#) provides the exemplary pivot in this summer’s debates. After making clear that there is no degree problem, Bérubé reengages an earlier description of crisis:

There is indeed a crisis in the humanities. I have said as much in this very space: It is a crisis in graduate education, in prestige, in funds, and most broadly, in

legitimation. But it is not a crisis of undergraduate enrollment.

Bérubé attributes the “crisis of legitimation,” in part, to misleading and alarmist rhetoric about falling numbers, which he rightly perceives as an alibi: “the real lament is almost always about recent intellectual and curricular developments in the humanities, and the enrollment numbers are little more than a pretext for jeremiads.” The “recent developments” he has in mind are, in truth, not so recent. They are familiar terms from the culture wars—“Theory, race/gender/class/sexuality, jargon, popular culture”—which, as Bérubé gleefully insinuates, probably increased undergraduate interest in the humanities during the 1980s rather than the reverse.

They also diversified the humanities: Bérubé rightly marvels at the breadth and variety depicted in contemporary NCES data and at the “underacknowledged” growth of the Visual and Performing Arts.

Disdain for such diversity characterizes the jeremiads that Bérubé derides. [Mark Bauerlein](#) laments “the diminishing status of the humanities” and attributes this trajectory to “professors who can’t penetrate the narrow careerism of freshmen; administrators who foster a utilitarian outlook on education; an adversarial, social-critique curriculum that turns students off; an excessive focus on research.” [Lee Siegel in the Wall Street Journal](#) proffers the reductio ad absurdum of this position by arguing that training and research in literature (which here predictably stands in for the humanities as a whole) is entirely beside the point. “Every other academic subject requires specialized knowledge and a mastery of skills and methods,” Siegel declares: “Literature requires only that you be human.” Readers hoping to ferret out the program of postsecondary education that led Siegel to this preposterous conclusion should consult his

article.

Robin Wilson's recent Chronicle column (requires subscription), "[Humanities Scholars See Declining Prestige, Not a Lack of Interest](#)" synthesizes the contention that a crisis of "legitimacy" derives from humanists' specializations. In Bérubé's version of the legitimation crisis, there's plenty of blame to go around—the English department shares it with administrators and culture warriors. But Wilson is happy to stack up Bérubé, Bauerlein, and numerous other experts to focus blame on the alleged inability of humanists to engage a general audience.

Bauerlein supplies Wilson's argument with its keystone:

"Can you find me a dean who is going to come into the office and say, 'I am really, really proud of what our English professors are doing with their research, and I want to send them to talk to alumni groups about their latest books?'" Mr. Bauerlein asks. "There is no audience for humanities research, no consumption, no measure of impact anymore."

Do not be distracted, gentle reader, by the manifold wrongness of this statement.

Never mind the retrograde conflation of "English professors" with "humanities research"—your institution may not be publicizing the efforts of faculty members working in Arabic, say, or Theater.

Never mind that when Bauerlein says "English professors" he cannot possibly mean those creative writers who teach in English departments and find their latest books splashed across university home pages.

Never mind that [deans](#) ready to trumpet the works of their humanists actually do [exist](#) or that measures of "impact" have multiplied as quickly as the requirement that scholars

demonstrate it.

Never mind all that, but do notice that Bauerlein's hyperbole makes a valid point: much of contemporary humanist research is not addressed to "alumni groups."

This hardly makes our scholarship unique. Much of the research that goes on across any university is equally opaque to donors: everyone from the astrophysicist to the zoologist has reason to observe that what seems like crucial scholarship within a discipline can look esoteric from without.

Demonstrating the value of scholarship for non-specialist audiences requires effort, and in many cases pitching professorial research entails more effort than faculty, deans, development officers, press agents, and alumni organizations are willing to commit.

These various parties are nowhere in the framing of the problem provided by Wilson, and for good reason: to foreground the range of mediators involved in presenting scholarship to general audiences directs attention away from "the humanities" toward a wider and more complicated array of institutions and actors.

Whatever else a crisis of "legitimacy" does, it typically keeps the focus narrowly on "us," the humanists, and in a manner that rewards a readership drawn in by the recent coverage of humanities crisis. "If there is no decline," this readership might wonder, "then what's the fuss?" Answer: trouble of another sort—decline in "prestige, not interest." Begin the next round!

The imagined community of readers for a *Chronicle* article like Wilson's is larger and more diverse than the "narrowly careerist" undergraduates of Bauerlein's lament. Teachers and their students may well read her article, or Siegel's in the *Wall Street Journal*, or David Brooks's work in the *New York Times*, but they are not singled out. For these writers to

successfully address their broad audiences, they need to provide a common reference point. "Crisis" does that work, generating the minimally shared grounding that enables Wilson and other writers, editors, newspapers and periodicals to rehearse a recognizable theme. In disagreeing with the way Wilson's article presents "the crisis," we too agree to reproduce this theme.

Those familiar with the past century of humanities work on mediation (or language, or form) should find it easy enough to follow our reasoning here. Bauerlein, Bérubé, our humble selves, and all the rest may succeed in convincing particular readers of this or that, but as a group we are not well understood as engaged in persuasion, communication, or conversation. Rather, we map terrain, demarcate limits, establish some facts as settled and other as open for contestation. This process revises how "the humanities" get discussed in the venues where they get discussed. All of us who engage in such labor are genre workers, busily renovating the plots, dramatis personae, and mise-en-scene of the "humanities" that can be assumed when one sits down next to a reader of the *Wall Street Journal*.

The ability to do this genre work has very little to do with research specialization. People trained as journalists, literature professors, and biologists are all equally capable of revising and reproducing the theme of "the humanities in crisis." But, of course, not every capable individual is equally well positioned to intervene. The ability to update the genre has a good deal to do with processes beyond any individual's control—institutional sanction, editorial selection, good timing, and so on. Working across institutional boundaries and sectors only amplifies the layers of mediation between any writer's particular contribution and substantial changes to what any writer can assume her readership knows.

Precisely because mediation is involved, the problem of

“general” versus “specialized” education is much better understood from the vantage point of consumption rather than knowledge production. Students enrolled in “Introduction to Film and Media” classes, readers of *Cinema Journal*, and viewers of *The Daily Show* are not only different audiences but different kinds of audiences. Different rules structure performances in these different domains, which means that research results—whether settled facts or challenging new interpretations—require different presentations in these different fora. That difference is determined not by what the researcher knows but by what the audience is imagined to know.

Notably, the audience imagined by “humanities in crises” coverage in the *Chronicle* and the major daily papers does not assume consensus about the content of “general education,” but does assume that the humanities’ mission is to anchor such a program. One frequently encounters claims that humanities education should enhance common culture, improve quality of life, and nurture an ability to engage in other than instrumental social transactions. One rarely meets consensus on what students should be reading, viewing, or listening to in pursuit of these aims—a problem sure to come up in any specialist discussion. As conducted in the press, the “generalization” vs. “specialization” debate largely emphasizes the social function humanities education is supposed to perform, rather than its content or methods.

True, conservative commentators are happy to dictate a reading list. Their champion listmaker is probably E. D. Hirsch, who has provided concerned parents a year-by-year syllabus from kindergarten on. The receivability of Hirsch’s initiative for a broad readership, and its marginality within professional scholarly practice, underscores a key assumption of the “humanities crisis” genre, namely, that “general education” will produce common culture through exposure to common works.

In the *Chronicle* et al., the logic of “great books” needs no explanation. “Great books” (or paintings, movies, plays,

symphonies, etc.) tell readers they are in the presence of a humanist argument in the same way that song and dance numbers let audiences know they are watching a musical. At issue is not only the value of particular works, but also the type of knowledge and pleasure that circulates around and through them. The ability to talk about works others recognize as “great” is liable to make just about anyone feel smart.

Even those participants in the “crisis” debates who would never endorse a great books curriculum may be tempted to let its logic stand, rather than risk undermining its built-in case for the humanities’ redeeming social value.

It is fundamental category error, however, to assume that the rules for writing popular humanities arguments should also govern humanities research and curriculum design. If professional humanists learned nothing else from the culture wars, we should have learned that contemporary culture is far too various and complex to be controlled by a syllabus.

Contemporary humanities research offers a number of sophisticated ways of explaining not only what cultures past and present value, but also how those values have been contested and altered. This variety should not worry us: managing and explaining it is part of what we have to offer students and professionals in other disciplines. Nor should we flinch from contests over the content of “general education.” Where selection is required, debate should flourish.

What should worry us is the paranoid control fantasy that the “legitimacy crisis” layers over the “general education” narrative. It is bad for us to imagine that our problems could be solved by presenting a more homogenous front. This is a mid-century fantasy. It belongs to a moment when it was possible to imagine the uniformity of both the American college age population and the audience for mass media. A moment before, [Ben Schmidt has recently reminded us](#), significant numbers of women began entering professional fields and the pre-professional programs that provided

training in them. A moment before, furthermore, a whole range of demographic shifts diversified university student populations and an array of programs organized around geographic and demographic areas of study reoriented the university towards the problem of difference. It was precisely in response to such developments that conservative journalists, bureaucrats, politicians, and professors reanimated midcentury rhetoric in the 1980s.

Before it looked like a hostile reaction to academe, the dream of uniformity led the authors of [1945's Harvard Redbook](#) to envision the entire US education system—kindergarten through graduate school—as an alternative to the threat presented by mass culture's organizing power. The secret to doing so was to standardize what was taught, especially at lower levels, and to thus answer the competing process of homogenization that was happening via network television. It is important to remember that Harvard never bought this program. The Truman administration picked up some of the Redbook's recommendations, and important policy discussions certainly reflected its approach. Nonetheless, 1960s and 70s changes to academic funding such as the Pell grant program had more sweeping effects on the university than anyone's plan for general education reform.

Just like network television, the idea of general education lives on largely as a reminder of how different the world is today. Professors and education administrators work in multiversities whose organizational structure is designed to reproduce specialization. Students get their introduction to this structure when they begin to think about their degrees, and they will continue to inhabit the problem of specialization when they graduate.

The authors of this spring's Harvard report "[Mapping the Future](#)" are right to observe that humanists ought to be thinking about the place of their curricula in this context. For the authors of this report, the transition from high

school humanities to college humanities at Harvard seems particularly in need of consideration: "Over the last 8 years," the authors of the report write, "more than half of students who as pre-Freshmen indicate an intention to concentrate in a Humanities concentration end up in a different division" (8). Students have more choices at college than in high school, and humanities professors can always do more to explain the relation between the two. Likewise, they face an increasingly complex and important task in explaining how the choices students make in college prepare them for futures that include work.

These days students need less help understanding "common culture" than they do appraising the relation among specialized sorts of study and specialized sorts of labor. Life affords many opportunities to reflect on the groups to which one belongs; fewer opportunities to evaluate competing ways of understanding such groups. "Citizenship," the shibboleth of Cold War educational policy debates, is liable to seem a different kind of activity for students in Political Science, Journalism, Economics, and English literature classes. Accordingly, the work of managing the media relations, party organization, policy formation, and campaign strategy through which citizenship can be enacted falls to experts in various fields. Citizens, students, and professors alike confront the problem of relating the proliferation of specializations within the academy to an increasingly differentiated world of work.

The problem of specialization looks different at the undergraduate and graduate levels, but its urgency is apparent for both. For undergraduates, who should be encouraged to explore a diversity of specializations, the primary challenge lies in selecting among them. For graduate students, who have already chosen, the primary challenge lies in understanding the professional paths afforded by that choice. There are options other than academic careers. Although Stanford's

proposal to require graduate students in the humanities to choose whether they are training to become scholars or something else may not be the best approach, it has the merit of admitting up front that, as with undergraduate degrees, not all PhD candidates in a particular program are training for the same kinds of jobs.

Professional humanists are not specifically trained to address a general public, although it is certainly true that they can cultivate that skill. What allows Bauerlein or Brooks or Siegel to write their journalistic commentary is not mastery of Shakespeare, but rather rhetorical training that might be acquired in any major that privileges argumentative writing, many of which are in the humanities.

Op-Ed commentators are specialists. Their specialization does not keep them from addressing their audiences, but rather enables it. Any specialization can lay claim to general conversation once connected with that audience. Narrowness did not prevent Jacques Derrida from becoming a celebrity, although neither was Derrida's celebrity entirely of his own making. The public intellectual, like the Op-Ed columnist or the Hollywood actor, succeeds not by virtue of personal talent alone but by dint of a system of relations that gives that talent an audience. (David Shumway was right to call the academic version of this a [star system \[requires subscription\]](#)). Humanities programs train the managers and editors and scriptwriters and many of the other experts who participate in the reproduction of such star systems as much as they train the specialists who become stars.

The humanities are not outside contemporary networks of experts, in other words, but very much participants in, contributors to, and sometimes managers of them. Professional humanists participate in meritocracy, whether they want to or not.

Meritocracy should not be confused with elitism. It dreams not

of enduring power but of provisional authority. Merit is situational. It favors talent but rewards competence. It ranks, but also standardizes. A properly functioning meritocracy should be less obsessed with identifying "excellence" than with improving ordinary performance. It should care more about the aggregate than the outliers. It should worry more about the results it produces than how well it is loved.

It would be good for professional humanists to nurture their meritocratic fantasies. But to do so, they will need to give up the midcentury dream of a standardized "general education" that required academics to disavow their role in shaping the very mass culture they opposed.

The academic humanities launch students into a division of labor. If this seems a controversial assertion, it is because it cuts against the generic argument. Like a good guy in a black hat, it runs counter to the popular case for the humanities' value. Focusing on the undergraduate experience, this case assumes that exposure to great works will generate common culture. It wants to give humanists the job of preparing students not for work but for citizenship, life, or what-have-you. Universities no longer work this way, if indeed they ever did.

Put differently, one might say that if general education requirements prepare students for "life," they do so by acquainting them with a variety of specialized knowledges—many of which start from incommensurable premises. Concentration in a major confers some form of credentialed expertise—a specialization. We do no service to general ed students, undergraduate majors, and graduate students when we deny the existence of this differential training. Regretting our specializations is not the way to improve our reputations on campus or in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. Instead, we need to be clear about how our specializations enable humanities students to go to work. With others.