

# From Academic Freedom to Organizational Democracy

In his [July 2015 Inside Higher Ed](#) column, Christopher Newfield usefully notes that faculty have lost the ability to see academic freedom as a public relations problem. In a [follow-up post](#), he proposes that “organizational democracy” will allow us to solve this problem. We agree with both posts, although as usual a lot depends on what “organizational democracy” might mean.

The ongoing [unpleasantness](#) in [Wisconsin](#) and its [potential national ramifications](#) provide the occasion for Newfield’s intervention. Instead of construing Wisconsin as a reminder that professorial labor requires special protection, Newfield proposes that we strive to discuss the future of work in general. The demand for extraordinary privileges only really wins the day, he observes, when addressed to an audience already “inside the academic consensus that the pursuit of truth requires intellectual freedom and professional self-governance.” It is reasonable to expect that, lacking such protections in their own work lives, most people would find themselves outside that consensus and thus “wouldn’t immediately see why empowering chancellors will hurt teaching or slow the pace of discovery.”

In addition to claiming a unique ability to speak truth to power, faculty (not only at Wisconsin) also tell themselves that the market for professorial talent demands tenure. Universities must guarantee it in order to compete with other universities, or so the conventional wisdom goes. Newfield observes that the size of the reserve labor pool currently willing to work without tenure undermines this pitch. More importantly, the competitiveness meme does not meet the challenges of our moment. “The U.S. doesn’t have a

competitiveness disadvantage,” he writes, “it has a collaborative disadvantage, and universities are needed more than ever to develop new kinds of collaborative capabilities.” Developing those capacities presents an organizational and media relations challenge worth embracing.

Doing so requires unlearning the special status argument, which as Newfield suggests goes back to the earliest twentieth-century steps to institutionalize the notion of academic freedom in the U.S. One of the AAUP’s most durable claims, he explains, constructs “academic freedom as the great exception to the autocratic managerialism of American business life.” The 1915 [Declaration](#) that announced the AAUP as academic freedom’s advocate-in-chief indeed sought to distinguish faculty appointment from the relation of a “private employer to his employees.”

It equally, and even more emphatically, addressed the threat from the “tyranny of public opinion”:

*The tendency of modern democracy is for men to think alike, to feel alike, and to speak alike. Any departure from the conventional standards is apt to be regarded with suspicion. Public opinion is at once the chief safeguard of a democracy, and the chief menace to the real liberty of the individual... An inviolable refuge from such tyranny should be found in the university. It should be an intellectual experiment station, where new ideas may germinate and where their fruit, though still distasteful to the community as a whole, may be allowed to ripen until finally, perchance, it may become a part of the accepted intellectual food of the nation or of the world.*

At the core of the argument exempting faculty from the usual American work rules one finds a logic depicting the university an “inviolable refuge,” a redoubt shielded against groupthink, a bunker to protect the professors who would convince the nation to eat its fruits and vegetables. Selling the

university was thus made congruent with selling potentially controversial (but good for you!) ideas. This was an explicitly elitist position in the professional mode: experts served a public that did not know its own best interest.

Once opened, such a logic of exception was renewed over the course of the twentieth century by august bodies including the US Supreme Court. In 1966, Justice Brennan declared in his [majority opinion to Keyishian v Board of Regents](#) that “our Nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned.” As [Marjorie Heins](#) points out on the AAUP’s blog, however, this principle has met difficulty in practice, and the AAUP counsel’s guidance on “[The Current Legal Landscape](#)” asserts that “the scope of the First Amendment right of academic freedom for professors remains unclear.”

Uncertain as a legal right, tenure succeeded as institutional policy, but later in the history of American academia than faculty may think. Despite AAUP successes in the 1910s and 20s, tenure protections remained mostly informal and dependant on the will of senior administration for much of the century. When Rice University surveyed policies at seventy-eight universities in 1935, it found that fewer than half had formal rules about tenure protection. Tenure was not a standard and ubiquitous feature of American higher education before the 1970s, [Caitlin Rosenthal](#) recounts. There are, Rosenthal explains, competing stories about how this came about. Lost in the usual history of professorial advocacy, she argues, is the ready acceptance by administrators of the institutional competition idea, with tenure chalked up as one of the “practical exigencies of recruiting and maintaining excellent faculties” (16).

Before faculty could assume that a “tenure line” would mean pretty much the same thing at any institution that advertised one, a rationale in which academic freedom benefited not only

the faculty and (ultimately) the public but also the university needed to be established. Consider the landmark case of University of Wisconsin Professor Richard T. Ely. As commentators on current events including [William Bowen and Eugene Tobin](#) observe, the 1894 Ely case made Wisconsin a central example in chapter one of the American history of academic freedom that Governor Walker and company now hope to revise. In a column for *The Nation*, Wisconsin's superintendent of public instruction Oliver Wells alleged that Ely, Director of the School of Economics, "believes in strikes and boycotts, justifying and encouraging the one while practicing the other." Wells concluded that such propagation of "utopian, impractical, or pernicious doctrines" made Ely unfit for employment as a Wisconsin professor. The Regents appointed a committee to investigate and serve judgment. They not only found Ely innocent of the charges leveled against him, but also took the opportunity to question whether such allegations should have mattered to the university in the first place. Professors should be free, the Regents declared, "to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead."

The Regents committee's pronouncement, aka the Wisconsin Magna Carta, relied on the implication that such freedom would distinguish the state's great university from other workplaces. "Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere," the committee wrote, "we believe the great State University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone truth can be found." This past June, UW-Madison Chancellor Blank used the remark to sum up her article "[Why State Lawmakers Must Support Tenure at Public Universities](#)"—preached to a choir of *Chronicle of Higher Education* readers.

Trumpeting Badger faculty freedoms looked less defensive in 1894, when, according to the *State Journal*, the Regents committee provided the university with a successful publicity coup. "Incidentally if not inadvertently the report contains a

résumé of the good work done at the university ever since the civil war," the paper noted. "This handsome advertisement has been telegraphed all over the country."

Advertisement itself rapidly became a Wisconsin tradition. Early in the new century, recount the historians Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen, administrators enlisted the English Department to write bulletins conveying to newspapers "in an attractive way, the story of discoveries, inventions, and innovations" across campus (II: 90). "The aggressive businessman does not wait for the consumer...to purchase his articles," declared Wisconsin President Charles R. Van Hise in his 1904 inaugural address. "Are we going to be less aggressive in education than we are in business?" In 1917, Wisconsin joined Yale, California, and Indiana to be among the first members of the American Association of College News Bureaus. That membership grew to 75 schools by the late 1920s.

Meanwhile, at Wisconsin and elsewhere, the faculty's promotional duties were handed off to public relations professionals. In his 1928 *Propaganda*, no less a figure than public relations pioneer Edward Bernays recognized universities as early adopters (140). "It may surprise and shock some people," revealed a columnist in the magazine *Personality*, "to be told that the oldest and most dignified seats of learning in America now hire press agents, just as railroad companies, fraternal organizations, moving picture producers and political parties retain them. It is nevertheless a fact" (qtd. in *Propaganda* 142). Working with societies like the National Education Association, Bernays noted, universities not only used publicity to promote themselves and their professors but also to redress more general concerns, like the prestige of teachers. Thus the work of promoting the public value of the university, which justified academic freedom, passed to salaried professionals who could not earn that freedom. By definition, these professionals could not remain within an academic cloister

that shielded them from tyrannical public opinion but needed, as Bernays put it, to “interpret the public for the client” in order to be able to “interpret the client to the public” (*Crystalizing* 14).

With accelerating fervor after the 1970s normalization of tenure (and job market collapse), postsecondary institutions turned to non-tenure track faculty to perform essential teaching functions, and academic freedom was also used to mark the difference between these instructors and their tenure track peers. As [widely cited National Center for Education Statistics numbers show](#), by 2009 non-tenure-track faculty constituted roughly 70% of the instructors employed by institutions of higher education. As [Jennifer Ruth](#) ably chronicles, our present tenure system distinguishes not only faculty from non-faculty professionals but also stratifies faculty into haves and have nots.

Particularly at the large public universities, the AAUP’s “isolated refuge” of 1915 now looks more like a social microcosm comprising, in addition to various ranks of teachers, researchers, and administrators, a campus police force, medical services, commercial “auxiliary enterprises,” groundskeeping and maintenance staff, and so on.

An organizational democracy in which all these university stakeholders participated would differ considerably from the currently prevailing forms of “faculty governance.” Academic departments and their traditional extensions, e.g. the “faculty senate,” do not seem well positioned to join the rest of the campus workforce in discussions that might be called democratic. The habits of (relative) departmental autonomy in employment matters such as the hiring, merit evaluation, tenure, and promotion of in-field colleagues run bone deep, almost as deep, perhaps, as faculty isolation from Human Resources interaction with their nonexempt coworkers.

Force of habit so strongly connects “academic freedom” and

departments today because the two forms grew up together: both are features of the uniquely American university that developed around the turn of the last century. As [Louis Menand](#) explains, tenure has worked to strengthen disciplinary and departmental balkanization, to protect sociology professors not only from administrative or public tyranny but also from the interference of physics professors. In their canonical 1955 *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States*, Richard Hofstadter and W. P. Metzger elaborate the danger that “in fighting on the line of intramural law...the temptation is to make academic freedom coterminous with the security of professors in the guild” (457). To shun that temptation, we do well to follow Newfield in thinking about “professor” as a job among others. Hofstadter and Metzger’s argument, however, suggests why that might be hard to do.

If, as Newfield observes, tenure-line faculty expect and enjoy “protection from the at-will employment practice of firing any employee without cause,” it is worth remembering that some non-faculty university employees have that protection too. The campus police might have union representation, for example, although it is likely to be different from faculty union representation (if they have it), which is also likely to be different from graduate student union representation (if they have it), and so forth. Most campuses will have detailed policies defining terms of probation, evaluation, and procedures for termination of nonunion, nonexempt employees. Expect where specific statutory provisions apply—for example, in the case of overtime rules or Family Medical Leave—policies and contracts define working conditions on most large campuses. In other words, campuses in general are more “for cause” than “at will” kinds of workplaces, in which some effort has gone into making it difficult to terminate employment based on administrative caprice.

We are definitely not suggesting that “for cause” protections work uniformly or well across our campuses. We are suggesting,

rather, that a discussion of termination for cause involving all employees need not start from the habitual “have” and “have not” discussion currently surrounding tenure. It could, rather, begin from the assumptions that everyone is “special” in this division of labor because we all have different jobs and that no one deserves to be an “at will” employee.

Being in favor of “for cause” for everyone does not really explain the kind of division of labor that one might favor, however. It does not explain the institutional form in which organizational democracy might take place. More pointedly, holding out academic freedom as what Newfield calls a model for “general economic and social justice virtues” does not speak to deeply ingrained (departmentalized) academic commitments to “merit” and “talent” crucial to the faculty’s peer review, shared governance, and other workplace features that we might also like to defend.

If one wants to hold onto the value of faculty expertise, the observation that “professor” is a job like many others is as insufficient as it is necessary. From the beginnings of the American research university, the faculty’s job description has entailed producing potentially uncomfortable truths in the lab or classroom. We think it should continue to do so. But it is equally clear that the division of labor tasked with creating, maintaining, circulating, and implementing the truths faculty produce has changed considerably in the past century. Not only does the contemporary university employ more diverse types of professionals than its forebears imagined, but the mediasphere in which it addresses its publics is [noisier](#), more diverse, and [differently professionalized than it was when Wisconsin first promoted its Magna Carta](#). Newfield is right to point out that we should not expect old arguments to explain this new context. Thus, collaboration.

How best to collaborate then? And with whom? Certainly academic arrangements provide models (labs! committees!), but they are not the only ones. We share our organizational



vernacular both with a more expansive set of co-workers than we typically acknowledge and with a more expansive set of institutions. In truth, the university holds no monopoly on labs, committees, departments, and classrooms. To collaborate effectively, we need to become conversant in a broader range of organizational forms and allow that we might learn from them as they might learn from us. Alan Liu makes one such suggestion, arguing persuasively beginning with his 2004 *Laws of Cool* that academics can learn things about project-based research from the world's silicon valleys, alleys, and savannahs. The creative industries offer other models for project-based collaboration: Hollywood's includes collective bargaining.

No matter how democratic the organizational scheme, it will require a media relations strategy.

In its early twentieth century invention, tenure as a public service endowed faculty with work protections that "the public" at large did not have. Pointing out that it still lacks them is not a great rallying cry. Far better to contend that anyone's termination should have a justifiable cause. That would not only be a better public relations strategy but also require the faculty to better understand how the organizations that employ them work (a project to which Newfield has made a long string of notable contributions). It would be good for faculty to remember as well as explain that "sifting and winnowing" requires in practice many different kinds of labor from a broad spectrum of employees. This would of necessity require us to question the habit of equating "academic freedom" with departmental prerogative, to acknowledge that other types of organizations might offer interesting labor models, and to embrace the challenge of overcoming our national collaboration deficit.

The stakes of such engagement are indeed established by Governor Walker's plan for the University of Wisconsin, as embodied in the statutory change singled out by the recent

joint [AAUP / AFT-Wisconsin statement](#) on the matter. This change authorizes faculty layoffs due to “a budget or program decision regarding program discontinuance, curtailment, modification, or redirection.” It lays the ground for the very decision-making it describes, moving tenure from statute to policy, empowering administrators to do away with programs at will, and creating the occasion for them to do so by cutting \$250 million from the state’s allocation.

The combination justifiably commands attention. The question of who, if not senior administrators alone, should make decisions about “program discontinuance, curtailment, modification, or redirection” (not to mention innovation) has multiple stakeholders within the university and outside it.

If there is to be organizational democracy in the university (for starters), it will not deserve the name unless it can convincingly defend both the particular kinds of value that faculty produce and the division of labor in which they produce it.

Wisconsin Republicans may have accidentally supplied academic freedom with a new banner to replace the quaint “sifting and winnowing” of the “Magna Carta.” In 2014, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos proclaimed that he wanted the university to abandon research on “[the ancient mating habits of whatever](#)” in favor of research economically beneficial to the state. The rebuttal, of course, is not only that university research provides a tremendous economic benefit, but also that ancient mating habits are [fascinating](#), that their study offers many [practical applications in daily life](#), and that such study is potentially limitless, indeed extensible to “whatever.” What could be more worthy of a collaborative effort engaging the university in all its parts?

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## **If Computer Science Is our Friend, Can STEM be our Enemy?**

In his recent blog post, "[The Afterlife of the Humanities](#)," David Theo Goldberg thanks diverse colleagues for helping him understand current "challenges and changes facing the humanities, and the academy more generally." Those challenges are both familiar and daunting. They include: "expanding managerialism and administrology, creeping professionalization and instrumentalization in career development, the public emphasis on STEM and the social disenchantment with the humanities."

If STEM appears here as part of the increasingly hostile environment the humanities have to confront, this does not prevent Goldberg from singling out computer scientists as necessary for a humanities "afterlife." Approving of the role computer scientists played in developing MOOC applications

beyond “talking head videos,” Goldberg presents such applications as part of the larger project of innovation known as “the digital.” In the wake of this sea change, “our ways of relating, of critical commentary, our temporalities and modes of relation, the contrast between the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ have all been profoundly affected.” Collaborations among humanists and computer scientists represent an academic vanguard riding (if not producing) this wave, generating all the while “new objects of analysis such as software studies, platform studies, screen studies, and gaming studies, cultural analytics, or production of and reflection on electronic literatures and poetry.” Thus the question: if computer science is our friend, can STEM be our enemy? (The answer is: no.)

Goldberg is obviously not alone in thinking of computer science as an ally for humanists. The University of California, Santa Cruz institutionalized that alliance with its [B.S. in Computer Game Design](#), which “provides a rigorous education in computer science, in concert with a broad introduction to those aspects of art, music, narrative, digital media, and computer engineering most relevant to games.” [Stanford](#), meanwhile, plans to offer new joint majors in Computer Science and, alternatively, Music or English. Through such means, proclaims Stanford English professor Nicholas Jenkins, “The worlds of the humanities and computer science are coming closer together.” Undergraduates in the University of Arizona’s [School of Information Sciences, Technology, and Arts](#), may choose from either a B.S. in Information Science and Technology or a B.A. in Information Science and Arts, the later promoting itself as extending the idea of a “liberal arts education” because “In the Information Age, a well-educated citizen must understand the interrelatedness of information science, technology and arts.” Georgia Tech’s [School of Literature, Media, and Communication](#) offers an array of programs including a B.S. in Computational Media that requires students to choose both a humanities and a

computer science “thread.” Southern Methodist University offers a [B.A. in Creative Computing](#) which it describes as “a new, highly interdisciplinary major combining theory and methodology from computer science and engineering with aesthetic principles and creative practice from the arts.” And so on.

## **Again with the Science Wars?**

Since all this activity flies in the face of the narrative that presents “STEM” as adversary of the “humanities,” it is worth wondering just how committed various parties are to continuing that fight. The narrative paradigm was probably set by C. P. Snow’s 1959 “[Two Cultures](#)” lecture, although we would do well also to remember Laurence Veysey’s important contribution in his 1965 *Emergence of the American University*. Veysey characterized the university, from its late nineteenth century origins, as divided between arguments on behalf of useful research made by scientists and engineers and arguments on behalf of “culture” made by an unruly mob of humanist complainers.

In the 1990s, the two sides famously went to “war” over their differences. Developing a media relations strategy funded by the conservative Olin foundation and popularized by literary traditionalists in the “Culture Wars,” Paul Gross and Norman Levitt’s *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (1994) threw down a gauntlet happily picked up by the “academic left.” The editors of *Social Text* obligingly published the notorious [Sokal hoax](#).

With an obstinance satisfying to only the dimwitted and/or bellicose, mainstream journalism of the day delighted in setting naively realist scientific epistemologies against caricatures of “postmodernist” ones. Thus was it proven that the two cultures remained irreconcilable.

Scholarship at the time and since has established that the supposed sides in this argument largely talked past one

another. Explaining that there was really nothing to be learned about science and its study from the Sokal hoax, Andrew Ross hoped nonetheless “that the mutual embarrassment—for scientist and nonscientist commentators alike—will generate new and unforeseen kinds of dialog” (“Reflections on the Sokal Affair,” *Social Text* [1997] 50: 152). Mathematician [Gabriel Stolzenberg](#) began publishing detailed chronicles of the intellectual laziness and sloppy argumentation that fueled the “Science Wars.” Meanwhile, Ullica Segerstråle’s edited collection *Beyond the Science Wars: The Missing Discourse About Science and Society* (2000) provided an explanatory context for the often astonishing misrepresentations involved.

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the general-public-facing literature of the “Science Wars” is just about the last place one should look for insight concerning how “scientists” and “humanists” really think about their prospects for working together.

It may be more surprising to learn, however, that these two sides and their respective cultures do not in fact exist as such.

### **Identities Only Public Relations Can Love**

Science and Technology Studies (STS) veteran Steve Fuller usefully estranges the “two cultures” hypothesis in his contribution to the Segerstråle collection. “If we are indeed witnessing a clash of disciplinary worldviews,” he asks, “why have so few humanists and social scientists rushed to the side of their colleges who make the natural sciences and technology their objects of study?” (186). His answer is that STS in fact descends not from the efforts of social scientists but from those of natural scientists, like C.P. Snow, who felt that scientists should better engage humanist approaches.

Fuller provides an illuminating genealogy of the “Science Wars” from this perspective, and his argument receives

unacknowledged confirmation in John Guillory's 2002 *Critical Inquiry* article on the Sokal affair. Guillory demonstrates that literary critics have a stake in the "two cultures" debate, but only if they can construe it as being all about them. The Sokal hoax "has less to tell us about the politics of science, or science studies," he asserts, "than about the history of criticism" (471). Specifically, "because the antirealist position had achieved something close to the status of consensus in the literary academy, it did not have to be backed up by fully elaborated philosophical arguments, it could simply be stated" (475). Tidily sweeping several decades of relatively autonomous work in STS under the rug of the "literary academy's" consensus, Guillory goes on to explain why a rigorous literary theory, purged of troubling influences from the social sciences, would not have left itself open to attacks on "cultural construction." Construing the Sokal affair as the reproduction of "two cultures" requires stern reduction of "the humanities" to a disciplinarily limited problem set. Just so, Guillory lectures his audience, the only difference that really matters is between the "methodology of the sciences (observation, experiment, quantification) and the methodology of criticism (interpretation)" (498).

For Fuller, in contrast, the lesson to be learned from the "Science Wars" is that the sides have been drawn all wrong: "a more productive debate would realign the parties so that scientists and STSers who wish to protect the academy from the rest of society could stand on one side, while those who wish to use the academy as a vehicle for reforming society could stand on the other" (209). We agree: that debate would be more productive.

It is important to note that Fuller's argument (published in 2000) precedes the moment when "STEM" leapt easily to academic lips (hard to date exactly, but sometime around the 2007 publication of the Congressionally commissioned report *Rising*

*Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*, which uses the term, but not promiscuously). Although the rise of STEM clearly structures any number of arguments in the present, its very assemblage invites skepticism about “two cultures” thinking.

STEM betrays its essentially bureaucratic origins in grouping as “science, technology, engineering, and mathematics” disciplines that otherwise think of themselves as distinct and often internally split between “basic” and “applied” orientations. No doubt, the rubric has recently served an important function for funders and policymakers—something of the scope of activity can be grasped via the [STEMConnector](#)—but it has done so precisely by bundling into one nation, as it were, what might otherwise seem a diverse archipelago.

(It is worth noting that the success of this effort has a precedent in the organization as “the humanities” of all those disciplines left out of the developing “natural” and “social” science areas of the 1930s.)

The internal diversity of STEM could hardly escape scientists. Computer scientists provide the case in point. Although undoubtedly part of the triumphant nation of STEM, computer scientists apparently still feel the need to establish that their science is one. In “The Science in Computer Science: The Computing Sciences in STEM Education” (*Ubiquity* March 2014 DOI: 10.1145/2590528.2590530), Paul Rosenbloom argues that “It is time to go beyond the straightforward conclusion that computer science is a respectable scientific discipline—such as physics or psychology—to the bolder conclusion that computing actually constitutes an entire domain of science. . . . The computing sciences are the equal of the physical, life and social sciences.” Rosenbloom locates this science’s distinction in its ability to understand “information and its transformation.” (Thanks to [Duncan Buell](#) for this reference.) Similar arguments were made in the 1970s, relatively early in the computer science enterprise (see, e.g., Wegner, Peter. “A



View of Computer Science Education." *The American Mathematical Monthly* 79.2 (1972): 168-179.)

With the complexity revealed by STEM in mind, we cannot entirely agree with James Clifford's admirable effort in "[The Greater Humanities](#)" to recognize "an already-existing reality—overlapping assumptions, epistemologies, and methods" adding up to a "sprawling configuration of knowledge practices" uncontainable "by more narrowly defined disciplinary traditions" (2).

It is clear that underacknowledged affiliations exist among literature, history, linguistics, "all the 'studies and interdisciplines,'" sociocultural anthropology, "embattled sectors of politics, economics, and psychology," and "what we might call the 'theoretical arts'—including theater arts, performance studies, film, and digital media." But we do not share Clifford's desire to construe this assemblage as STEM's "other half." Much better, we think, to acknowledge that "STEM" is no more a monolith than "The Greater Humanities" would be.

We ask you, fellow humanist: do you really want to approach potential collaborators in CS as an ambassador from the proud empire of "Greater Humanities" in hopes of striking a grand bargain with the mighty people of STEM? Or, might you be better off trying to figure out whether you can have a shared conversation with various scientists, social scientists, and fellow humanists concerned with "information" and the ends to which it can be "transformed"? The organizing rubric of the "two cultures," useful and probably essential for national policy debates and media campaigns, are—"Science Wars" style—more likely to thwart than encourage any decent conversation about what the university might do. Unlike the popular press, with its deeply ingrained habit of point-counter-point narration, academics really should be able to count past two.

This would seem especially to be urged by the fact that a great many of the “Greater Humanities” fields in Clifford’s list did not exist when C.P. Snow first lamented the “two cultures.” Indeed a comparable disciplinary explosion in the sciences arguably made it necessary to provide a slogan uniting “science, technology, engineering, and math.” The disciplinary proliferation that produced STS alongside computer science, the “theoretical arts,” and, say, biomechanical engineering, points, again, to an institutional problem set all constituents of the contemporary research university share.

### **It’s All about Work**

If there is any lingering truth to the two cultures model, it resides at the level of work practice. Where humanists largely insist on a single author (with all that entails for the fetishizing of genius that resides within a unique brain and body), research in the sciences and some wings of the social sciences involves far more various actors. These run the gamut from strictly hierarchical labs with a (more or less) charismatic leader as PI to crowdsourced experiments and fieldwork collaborations (replete with the possibility of native informants). Although humanists working in areas including STS or the history of anthropology are notable analysts and critics of these scholarly modes, they engage in them less often.

Humanists’ imaginations of what research looks like situates us in narrow disciplinary ways, as [Mario Biagioli](#) memorably argued in *Critical Inquiry* in 2009. The sciences are moving towards “organizing their practitioners around problems, not disciplines, in clusters that may be too short-lived to be institutionalized into departments or programs or to be given lasting disciplinary labels” (819).

For all that collaboration has become usual in certain corners of the humanities, it is still atypical for a humanist

approaching a new project to begin by imagining what kind of cluster or team will be required. Instead, if the project demands skills the humanist does not possess, she will seek to learn them herself. This was certainly John's approach when he decided to write a little bit about "[failed states](#)" and to do so read nothing but political science articles for the better part of a year. Mark notes that interdisciplinarity meant something very different when he was working in the University Libraries on a [digital video repository](#). That project involved teamwork among variously equipped experts brought together to engage a particular problem.

Precisely because it comes from science and the corporate sector, the project-based team is liable to provoke fears of contamination among humanists rigorously trained to believe their methods uniquely capable of "critique." Yet collaboration can also provide an invigorating interruption to humanist business as usual. This is how English Professor [Eduardo Cadava](#) described it in an interview (with [John's Fall 2013 working group](#)) about, among other things, his experience teaming up with [photographers and museum curators](#). "If I can put it this way," Cadava suggested, "collaboration should always also be about interrupting yourself. That's part of what can happen with a collaboration is that you can be interrupted, and I think things can happen when you're interrupted." Teamwork has the virtue of shaking the solitary scholar out of habitual practice.

Collaborative programs that link computer science and humanist work ought to make both appear more various. They ought to remind us that STEM is no monolith, as we argue above, and they also ought to loosen the grip of the solitary humanist researcher. We would not mandate teamwork in place of the solitary labors of humanists or scientists. Our hope, rather, is that a broader range of practices might fall within the norm for humanist research. Nearly a century ago, John Dewey identified "knowledge cooped up in private

consciousness" as myth. The humanities remain too much in its thrall.

Which is not to say that humanists commitments to single-author publication are "merely" ideological. "The science model," Biagioli argues, "is hardly applicable to the humanities because we usually decouple our research from the training of graduate students. Instead, some scientists' teaching takes the form of running labs where they train graduate students while conducting their own research. Therefore, not only do they have more time to engage in collaborations but they can also mobilize more resources (such as their labs and graduate students) for such projects" (821n16).

Humanists do not need labs (although some enjoy them). And they may refer to the labs they do need as "libraries." But the way labs "couple" graduate training with faculty research might spur us to imagine alternatives to our current arrangements, allowing us to steer more deftly between the Scylla of defensive ghettoization and the Charybdis of overloaded service commitment to interdisciplinary programs and centers.

We have had many occasions to flag the confusion of department with discipline on this work-in-progress blog. Persistent (and sometimes unconscious) efforts to make the one form fit the other produce a recurring stumbling block for humanist experimenters. For this reason, we enjoy Biagioli's evocation of a research model that does not need a department-like structure in order to educate students. This proposition appeals particularly to those of us (like Mark) who find themselves in institutional situations where strongly departmentalized humanities disciplines (like English and History) limit the contributions that locally non-departmentalized disciplines (like Film and Media Studies) can make to graduate training (and thus the reproduction of "the humanities"). There is, to be sure, no shortage of support for

“interdisciplinary” work among professors in established humanities departments, but the habits of disciplinary reproduction often leave little room in curricula for the development of alternative competencies.

Money in the humanities and social sciences has historically flowed more through tuition dollars than grants, which is part of why pedagogical experiments like those involving the construction of new joint majors between computer science and humanities departments is so appealing. But for these experiments to actually succeed in the longer term, they need to break down or radically supplement a departmental structure that tends to be inflexible in its relation to discipline. Once upon a time, humanities scholars sought to designate the seriousness of their enterprise by arguing that it rivaled the stringency of science. We suggest another kind of relationship, one less burdened by *ressentiment*. The lesson of the “Science Wars” should be that two cultures arguments do not serve us well at all, and that there is more to learn from the working friendships humanists are in the process of institutionalizing with computer scientists.

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## The 1960s Origins of the Academic Labor "Crisis"

Annual conventions and program revisions have made talk of graduate student education, labor, and [cost](#) particularly frothy in the last month or two. Interestingly, discussions of the graduate school mess are beginning to test the familiar narrative formula in which neoliberal administration + faculty complacency + lamentable economic events = really bad times

for freshly minted PhDs. As a result, it has become newly possible to discern how growth strategies of the 1960s share responsibility for the current fix. The legendary campus radicals of '68, it now seems necessary to recall, included graduate students who, as nominally temporary apprentices, assumed permanent responsibility for large chunks of the research university's undergraduate curriculum.

Although they may not identify it as such, recent developments reveal this legacy when they expose the dependency of research specialization on graduate student labor. In December, for instance, Johns Hopkins joined the likes of Stanford and the CUNY Grad Center in recasting the funding model for PhDs by providing summer support and cutting down time to degree. To this increasingly common formula Hopkins adds the goal of chopping PhD enrollments by 25% over five years. "To compensate for fewer graduate students available to teach undergraduate course discussion sections," Colleen Flaherty reported in [Inside Higher Ed](#), "Hopkins plans to hire more teaching assistants with master's degrees." Graduate students joined faculty in protesting this approach, arguing that a "critical mass" is necessary for smaller graduate programs especially to stay alive. Debate about shrinking PhD programs at the MLA yielded similar concerns (as [Scott Jaschik](#) recounts). Looking past the familiar problem of too many PhDs or too few tenure track lines, this concern helps draw renewed attention to the long-standing dynamic in which graduate student labor provides a critical leg of the triangle connecting research specialization with undergraduate instruction. Beyond the balancing of professional inputs and outputs, fundamental departmental labor and instructional models are at issue.

A related insight comes from recent historical analyses of job market trends. For instance, the statistician known as [Adjunct Nate Silver](#) looks at PhDs in the famously beleaguered field of German. Starting from 1960-61, he notes, "the number of Ph.D.s

earned each year tripled by 1966-67, and doubled again by 1972-73." Grad student enrollments went up in part to address the demand for professors predicted by growing undergraduate enrollments, but undergraduate growth was not nearly fast enough to keep pace with the proliferation of PhDs: "Between fall 1959 and fall 1969, total [undergraduate] enrollments jumped from 3.6 million to over 8 million. But a jump of 120% in enrollments didn't in itself call for an increase of over 500% in the number of Ph.D.s in German." The sense of a job market collapse in the 1970s was created not by economic contraction, Adjunct Nate concludes, but by the hyperactive PhD creation of the 1960s, combined with ill-conceived changes in the way the MLA advertised positions (or the lack thereof). After the late 60s boom and bust, the market was relatively stable for the next 30 years, with departments cranking out new German professors in numbers roughly proportional to positions advertised. Only after 2008 does a dramatic shift in this pattern occur, due a steep decline in the number of available tenure track lines.

As Adjunct Nate Silver points out, the period from around 1960 to the present is not simply a chapter in the history of the academic job market. Rather, it *is* the history of the academic job market, at least for key humanities disciplines. As Marc Bousquet has also observed (in [How the University Works](#)), the 1960s were the period that invented the apparatus of national searches for faculty lines that allows and encourages us to perceive this labor market as one. The MLA introduced the conference-based "Job Mart" in 1955 in an effort to replace the old-boy network as the primary hiring mechanism ("Hello, Professor Jones? Professor Smith here. We're hiring. Send over your brightest boy in Romanticism, won't you?"). In 1969, the Job Mart system "'broke down' because the problem 'was now one of locating jobs rather than candidates'" (Association of Departments of English qtd. in Bousquet 192). The MLA's notorious Job Information List replaced it.

There is more to the 1960s labor story, however, than an increase in the number (and variety) of PhDs and the development of new mechanisms for marketing them. This was the period that made graduate student teaching assistants essential functionaries of research university departments.

In a 1967 *Administrative Science Quarterly* special issue devoted to "Universities as Organizations," research professor of sociology Robert Dubin and research assistant Frederic Beisse argued that 1960s student activism had its principal source in the position and function of graduate assistants ("[The Assistant: Academic Subaltern](#)"). The TAs were led to revolt due to a fundamental organizational "disjunction": they had been given the teaching responsibilities of faculty without corresponding legitimation of their authority and perquisites to carry them out (522). The authors provide an historical trend analysis involving ratios of students to faculty and teaching assistants. In this way, they demonstrate that public research universities turned to graduate students to accommodate massive enrollment growth in the 50s and 60s.

In describing increasing reliance on TAs as part of the overall growth strategy characteristic of the university during the period of booming faculty employment, confident welfare state administration, and ascendant left intellectuals, Dubin and Beisse provide an alternative etiology for the well publicized troubles of late twentieth and early twenty-first century graduate students.

In the late 90s, academic humanists began to see reliance on graduate student instructors as part of the "causualization" of the academic workforce, a centerpiece of neoliberal administrative strategies that overwhelmed higher education in the wake of the 1970s economic crises. Graduate student exploitation, on this view, was the flip side of heavy-handed administration that, in the name of budget control, also constrained the growth and authority of tenure-line faculty.



In contrast, Dubin and Beisse diagnose increased use of TAs as reprising a familiar pattern in professional divisions of labor. In their view, the phenomenon illustrated a generally accepted principle:

*Whenever there is pressure on an established occupation or profession to provide more services, and the demand cannot be met through normal expansion of the supply of certified experts, then portions of the skill will be shifted, by a division of labor, to lower skilled and lower status work colleagues. (545)*

They offer, for example, the devolution of skills in medicine “from doctor to registered nurse to practical nurse to aide, or from doctor to technician” (545). This pattern is so obvious, according to the Dubin and Beisse, that we should marvel at the ability of faculty, administrators, and graduate students to avoid acknowledging that they were in the process of creating a new occupational class and deskilling undergraduate teaching. They sidestepped the issue through the idea of “apprenticeship.” By understanding graduate student teaching as a temporary state leading to mature participation in the profession, 60s faculty and administrators could pretend that the division of labor had not changed and hope that graduate students would outgrow their rebelliousness.

“The collective action of the sort employed by the assistants at Berkeley, while effective, is the antithesis of professional behavior,” Dubin and Beisse caution. “The long-term effects may be to produce a generation of professors whose notions of professional behavior and decorum differ sharply from those of the present generation” (546). While seeing the power of graduate student unionization, they have greater hope that undergraduate dissatisfaction will force change. Perhaps undergraduate complaints about the quality of TA-led classes would prompt administrators to reverse the trend and force faculty back into classrooms.

That did not happen. Graduate student unions succeeded at a range of public universities in the 1970s. On private campuses, however, the National Labor Relations Board refused to recognize graduate students as employees who could form unions before the year 2000. In all types of research institutions, TAs remain essential to staffing undergraduate curricula. The view of their work as apprenticeships has proven remarkably durable. It survived even the 1990s bait-and-switch that established the graduate student labor crisis as a humanities problem. In 1989, the infamous Bowen Report, "Prospect for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences," suggested that retirements and enrollment growth would create "a substantial excess demand for faculty." As a result, a susceptible proportion of college graduates (including us) were encouraged to pursue PhDs in the humanities. Report author William G. Bowen, however, had neglected to take the growing reliance on part-time workers into account (as Denise Magner explains [here](#).) When the demand he predicted failed to materialize, many aspirants found themselves prepared for jobs that did not exist. Calls to reform graduate education and employment practices became increasingly urgent.

"It is time to say, bluntly, that graduate education is losing its moral foundation," Cary Nelson and Michael Bérubé declared in 1995 ([Higher Education Under Fire](#) 20). In light of the flat job market for English PhDs, the proposition that graduate teaching assistantships were actually apprenticeships was in peril. Rather, it increasingly seemed that poorly compensated graduate student teachers were propping up a bankrupt system, which valued research productivity over teaching. In order to maintain their privileges, humanities professors were willing to throw their graduate students under the bus. English was in a particularly perilous position according to Nelson and Bérubé, because it had been singled out in 1980s and 90s attacks on "theory" and "political correctness." It offered the popular press, state legislators, and university administrators a convenient scapegoat for the phenomenon of

non-teaching faculty that was, in truth, much more pronounced in the sciences. Where Dubin and Beisse imagine political pressure from undergraduates might bring graduate exploitation to an end, Nelson and Bérubé hope that heightened awareness from faculty and administrators will solve the crisis. Failing to generate a groundswell of substantive “top-down” reforms, the authors soon gave their full-throated support to reenergized graduate student unionization efforts.

Meanwhile, professional associations in the period tended to double-down on the idea of apprenticeship and to respond to the plight of graduate students through (mostly ineffective) efforts to defend tenure ([Doe and Palmquist](#)). The perceived problem was not that faculty and administrators had grown accustomed to a division of labor that relied on a “subaltern” class of professionals, but rather that administrators had figured out how to control costs by shifting instruction to non-tenure earning lines. If Nelson and Bérubé saw in this dynamic a moral crisis for the humanities, other commentators like Bousquet discerned an epochal political-economic shift arising, in part, from the failures of “Fordist” management in the 1960s. Bousquet described “flexible faculty” as “just one dimension” in a post-Fordist mutation “of the university into an efficient and thoroughly accountable environment through which streaming education can be made available in the way that information is delivered: just in time, on demand, in spasms synchronized to the work rhythm of student labor on the shop floor” (44). Here, the TA provides a bellwether for the university’s sinister new project to fuel an even more alienating form of capitalism through the one-two punch of workforce realignment (causalization) and ideological warfare (informationalization).

Eschewing apocalyptic pronouncements for the comfortable neutrality of bureaucratic prose, no less an authority than the National Center for Education Statistics was, by 2009, prepared to certify the workforce realignment part of this

narrative. That year, the Digest reported a 59% increase in the number of part-time faculty and a 48% percent increase in graduate assistant employees between 1997 and 2007. It also reported a corresponding decline in the percentage of faculty with tenure from 56% in 1993-94 to 49% in 2007-08 (270). In addition to indicating that the university had blazed a trail into a terrifying new era, the trend was also susceptible to description as a new type of management challenge. To address this “new normal,” commentators of various stripes maintain, faculty need to be more willing to organize, and humanities PhDs need missions other than traditional faculty appointments (see, e.g, this in the [New York Times](#)). One important variation on this theme asks us to embrace the reality that the PhD already credentials graduates for jobs outside academe, a conclusion confirmed by a recent [study](#) by the American Historical Association.

Dubin and Beisse’s largely forgotten 1967 argument suggests that insistence on the relative novelty of the trend may be one reason graduate education and employment seem so difficult to reform. When they interpret the shift of undergraduate instructional responsibility to graduate student TAs as a predictable outcome of the university’s rapid postwar growth, they beg the question: How is it that this new division of labor could sustain the American research university for decades while continuing to appear temporary and illegitimate?

Read in tandem with Dubin and Beisse, Nelson and Bérubé’s 1995 account provides a kind of answer. In contrast to their forebears, Nelson and Bérubé do not associate reliance on TAs with the “deskilling” of undergraduate instruction. The authors are struck, rather, by the ever-increasing demands placed on educators of all sorts, and note that newly minted PhDs find themselves required to publish more to land a job than many professors would have been expected to produce in their entire careers in the 1970s. Nonetheless, like Dubin and Beisse in 1967, they expect their colleagues to bristle at the

impolite admission that a less prestigious and well-compensated professional class exists. "For decades American universities have fostered a kind of *idiot savant* academic culture," they observe. "Faculty members maintain expertise in their disciplines but remain mostly ignorant about how the university works" (Nelson and Bérubé 25). Who among us has not, on occasion, felt compelled to bemoan the ignorance of their coworkers? The particular ignorance at issue here, however, is the habitual sort. It is shared, to some extent, by those who would dispel it.

When Dubin and Beisse and Nelson and Bérubé chide their colleagues, they insinuate that the faculty have been irresponsible or incapable caretakers, unable or unwilling to shelter their charges from administrative zeal to contain costs while increasing student enrollments. What Dubin and Beisse know about professionalism or Nelson and Bérubé know about class analysis does not keep them from recapitulating the very apprenticeship model that their arguments show to be outmoded.

In myriad ways, *undergraduate* instruction after the 1960s stopped idealizing this kind of relationship between teacher and student. Increasingly, undergraduates were treated as mature economic agents. At a relatively young age, they were expected to make life-changing choices regarding institutions, programs of study, and levels of debt obligation with a cool eye to the project of securing themselves a future. Professors and other experts would guide their choices, but not assume responsibility for their outcomes. Perhaps largely because of graduate education's critical role in disciplinary reproduction, however, professors retained the habit of imagining graduate students as charges in need of paternalistic care. While we do not seek a more callous professoriate, it seems this habit may have thwarted full cognizance of the division of labor responsible for producing and employing the vast majority of professors, graduate

students, adjuncts, and administrators currently working in American higher ed.

It is not as if the faculty don't know their graduate students are employees. Rather, the problem is that they treat them as students first and employees second. What would happen if we reversed this, and treated them first and foremost as (fellow) employees? Bousquet argues that neoliberal administrative rhetoric considers graduate students rational actors while neoliberal administrative behavior reduces them to waste. To address this, he contends that graduate students should shake off their false consciousness and organize. A similar appeal rings through recent writing about adjunct labor and, as [Sue Doe and Mike Palmquist observe in the ADE Bulletin](#), academic professional organizations are increasingly endorsing this approach. These efforts represent a turn towards incorporating graduates in the humanities as part of a workforce, and as such are well worth supporting. Still, it remains striking how much they lag behind the 1960s emergence of the problem they seek to address. As Dubin and Beisse point out, the graduate students began organizing when universities used their labor to supplement the professoriate, while disavowing this new division of professional labor. The narratives currently revising our understanding of the university's recent past should take care not to repeat that disavowal.

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## Miller's Big Lie

Dear John,

Just finished Toby Miller's breathless provocation to [Blow Up the Humanities](#). In his blurb, Bruce Robbins admires its sass.

It has other virtues as well: a defense of the proposition that the humanities oughta be useful, a spirited rejection of what he calls the “Romantic elevation of consciousness” (Kindle location 1423) and, with it, of the conflation of literary studies with the Humanities, a cautious embrace of institutions, attention to humanities work, and advocacy of collaborative effort. A number of our favorite themes, in short. It’s too bad that Miller launches from a false premiss:

*There are two humanities in the United States. One is the humanities of fancy private universities, where the bourgeoisie and its favored subalterns are tutored in finishing school. I am naming this Humanities One, because it is venerable and powerful and tends to determine how the sector is discussed in public. The other is the humanities of everyday state schools, which focus more on job prospects. I am calling this Humanities Two.’ Humanities One dominates rhetorically. Humanities Two dominates numerically. The distinction between them, which is far from absolute but heuristically and statistically persuasive, places literature, history, and philosophy on one side and communication and media studies on the other. It is a class division in terms of faculty research as well as student background, and it corresponds to the expansion of public higher education and the way that federal funding fetishizes the two humanities. (Kindle location 22-27).*

Sound plausible, right? Media are popular! There’s money in them. And already from this first paragraph one knows which side one wants to be on. Forget the head-in-the-sand humanism of propertied elites. We, who work for a living at “everyday state schools,” have the force of numbers on our side. Those numbers suggest that “communication and media” trump “literature, history, and philosophy” any day of the week.

Or do they?

Miller's evidence for the numerical strength of "communication and media studies" comes primarily from Christopher Newfield's recap, in a 2009 issue of *Profession*, of "[Table 261. Bachelor's degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions, by discipline division: Selected years, 1970-71 through 2005-06](#)" from the *2007 Digest of Educational Statistics*. That table shows, as Newfield and Miller both report, 616% growth in "Communication, journalism, and related programs" since 1970, while English declined by 14%. Visual and Performing Arts (where, you'll recall, the CIP for film studies is located) increased by 174%. And "Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies" (which includes fields like Peace Studies alongside Gerontology and Historic Preservation and Conservation) grew by 404% over this same period. Miller's perception that growth in some of these areas equals growth in the Humanities may be colored by his experience at UC Riverside, where it appears that Communications and his own discipline of "Media and Culture Studies" have been lumped in a concentration called "Interdisciplinary Studies." If I'm guessing rightly how Riverside has reported this to IPEDS, the major has done well. 30.9999 Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies, Other was the fourth most popular bachelor's degree, behind Business, Psychology, and Biological and Biomedical Sciences in Riverside's 2011 completions. Although, more ominously, the [web page](#) declares that Riverside's Academic Senate has declared a moratorium on the major. Must be an interesting story there.

These comparative growth rates are red meat thrown in front of the crisis people: English is in decline! Majors are fleeing to business and media! As James English points out, however, a more meaningful interpretation of the figures pays attention to absolute numbers as a proportion of all completions (which have increased) and is sensitive to ups-and-downs within the period rather than fixing on the change from 1970 to 2006. For example, in that table from 2007, Communication, journalism, and related programs increased roughly 5 fold from 10,324



bachelor's degrees in 1970 to 51,650 in 1990. English language and literature/letters started that period with 63,914, then plummeted to less than 40,000 before rebounding to 51,170 in 1990. For most of the 1990s, English and Communication graduated roughly the same number of majors, but Communication picked up in the new century, adding another 20,000 or so completions by 2006. Twenty-first century gains in Comm, in other words, probably don't come at the expense of English, although 70s and 80s gains may have done.

More interestingly, growth rate comparisons reveal potential shifts in ways of understanding "the humanities." Miller's rhetoric indicates as much when it sweeps up mass comm—which almost never gets counted as a humanities discipline—along with "media studies." For Miller, it turns out that "media studies" really means cultural studies of a few particular flavors (he provides a genealogy in a late chapter). At the outset, however, we're encouraged to imagine a wider array of endeavors, since, after all, media studies is what workaday humanists do. I think you and I are generally in favor of humanist category confusion and, with Miller, of projects that enlist scholarly collaboration across disciplines conventionally mapped as humanities, social sciences, and STEM. The growth rates in areas like Visual and Performing Arts and Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies suggest there may be increasing opportunities for scholars able to engage in these ways. As I started to explain [here](#), these CIPs can be seen as encompassing disciplinary variety and potentially productive oddball institutional configurations. There is more to say about this.

In no sense, however, can comparative growth rates anchor the claim that "there are two humanities," that the difference between them maps onto social class, and that this great divide places English on the side of elites and media studies on the side of the people. To disrupt this sophomoric picture, one needs only to look to the [whole data set](#). In 2011, 7643

degree granting institutions reported via IPEDs—imagine Beauty Schools of America in these figures alongside Harvard and Swarthmore. Here's a breakdown of the number of institutions reporting first major bachelor's degree completions under specific CIPs of interest.

- 52.0201 Business Administration and Management, General –1727
- 42.0101 Psychology, General – 1396
- 23.0101 English Language and Literature, General – 1310
- 30.9999 Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies, Other – 639
- 09.0102 Mass Communication/Media Studies – 247
- 50.0601 Film/Cinema/Video Studies – 129

Business is the great demographic leveler. Institutions offering a bachelor's degree in it range from the numerous branches of ITT Technical Institute to the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Morehouse College, and Bob Jones University. English, however is not far behind. You can't get an English BA from ITT, but you can in Ann Arbor, at Morehouse, or Bob Jones (and in fact most of the places business degrees are offered). At the other end of the spectrum, 50.0601 is a truly boutique affair. Of 129 institutions granting degrees, 40 are Research Universities (very high activity), 30 are Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences, and 21 are Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs) according to Carnegie Classification. Consideration of associates degrees tips the balance still further in favor of business: 1341 institutions reported completions compared with 168 in 23.0101 and only 12 in 50.0601. Interestingly, 30.9999 picks up some ground here with 208 institutions showing associate degree completions.

The numbers confirm what ought to be perfectly obvious to anyone who works in the postsecondary humanities. The “dominance” of “literature, history, and philosophy” is not rhetorical, but institutional. These disciplines spent the better part of the 20th century securing their claims on

resources within all manner of institutions of higher education and, as importantly, beyond it, in mandatory K-12 education. The situation is in fact more nearly the opposite of what Miller suggests: a visible minority of elite scholars and experimental programs at a limited array of relatively well-funded research universities are busily mounting rhetorical and institutional challenges to the configuration stabilized by their mid-20th century counterparts. Call it a hypothesis.

Miller takes a classic vanguardist position, waving the people's banner far ahead of the masses who continue to want that old-fashioned English degree. Again, there's a lot to like about this position, which echoes some of what we've been saying here. But it would be better to emphasize the real contradictions, fractures, and possibilities of the present than to stage a phony class war between two versions of humanist endeavor. There are not one, not too, but many humanities in the United States, maybe more than there are humanities disciplines. Their futures hinge not the sublation of supposed opposites (Miller's device) but on their ability to arrange themselves in compelling and effective new combinations.

Mark

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**Ah, to train a "humanities**

# workforce.”

Dear Mark,

Your [post](#) on Michael Bérubé’s “[seamless garment of crisis](#)” talk at the Council of Graduate School’s annual meeting culminates for me a week of thinking about A) how out of touch the “[woe is us](#)” rhetoric has gotten and B) how exciting it is to be doing humanities administration right now.

I have a relatively small admin job compared to Bérubé’s, namely, directing graduate studies in my English department. Some weeks, however, all the big issues trickle down to the trenches.

In the past five days (or so), I’ve finished teaching the introduction to graduate studies class for our latest crop of first-year PhD students, watched the application numbers come in for next year, traded a flurry of emails with colleagues about one of the exams that we require of our students, prepared to mock interview students who have actual interviews scheduled at MLA, and noted with glee that the [Stanford plan](#) to overhaul humanities study (which we debated back in May [[John’s post](#)] [[Mark’s post](#)]) is an item on the agenda for a meeting of humanities grad studies directors on my campus in January.

These activities primed me for your “[Crisis, Crisis, Crisis](#)” post. From worries about a drop off in graduate school applications (which we in the humanities share with, among others, [law schools](#)) to the relative scarcity of the job market, it’s been a week for crisis thought. From the ambivalence of new graduates coming to grips with the idea that by entering a PhD program they are on a professional track to the ambivalence of faculty colleagues thinking about instrumentalizing their seminar offerings, it has also been a

week when I have thought about how very far we are from being able to translate David Laurence's notion of the "[humanities workforce](#)" into our discussions of program organization and curricula.

It is true, as you noted in May, that the Stanford plan risks fallaciously equating time to degree with "relevance" and, further, that it offers little suggestion of who is to regulate the increased numbers of newly minted PhDs a shorter time to degree might generate. What I continue to like about their approach is the demand that we regenerate our notion of what a humanities PhD can do by refashioning our training rituals. We won't be able to wrap our heads around "humanities workforce," it follows, if we can't go so far as to question the legacy course and exam requirements that we've inherited. I'm not so naive as to imagine that simply changing the prelim will solve all our problems, but it seems equally unlikely that polemical research like the sort you and I are engaged in will have any force if it doesn't translate into the curricular nitty gritty.

Your reiteration of what I take to be one of our main arguments over the course of this work in progress provides a case in point. You note that "the rhetorical opposition of 'the humanities' to the culture industries, while sometimes effectively self-serving for the humanities disciplines, has long masked a common endeavor to manage populations by managing media." Bérubé professes, as you note, to have "little sense of what viable alternatives to academic employment might be" for humanities PhDs. And you observe that a glance at the Humanities Resource Center's [online data](#) could have filled him in that 14.1% of them are managers of some sort. A further 5.8% are media specialists of some kind. If we widen our focus just a bit in terms of degree and talk about college grads as well, the common endeavor of managing media looks even more alive and well among humanities grads, even if English professors have little sense of it. Laurence reports

that (according to the 2003 National Survey of College Graduates) more humanities degree holders work as “artists, broadcasters, editors, public relations specialists, and writers” (735,500 or 13.6%) than work as elementary or secondary school teachers (640,600 or 11.8%).”

In a way, it’s hard to blame Bérubé for failing to anticipate that English professors are training media managers and managers more generally. As a native informant, I can tell you that I’ve never been in a curricular discussion in which we debated a course or exam based on its capacity to inculcate good management skills in our students. English is not alone in under-thinking its role in generating managers, but it may be that the text-based humanities disciplines are the most guilty of ignoring the work they do in reproducing media professionals. I’m not sure that the visual cultural people have as much trouble as the text folk, and thus don’t know if film studies for instance would be surprised at the way, as Laurence observes, “The concept of the humanities workforce makes visible the connection, too often obscured, between humanistic research and scholarship and development of a talent pool for the cultural sector of the economy, not excluding (although also not limited to) the business of producing popular culture.”

Laurence contends further, “Few academic humanists are accustomed to thinking of their research scholarship as specific examples that, cumulatively, function to keep alive the possibility of access to the cultural record and keep in good repair the tools, skills, and knowledges necessary to that access. Few are accustomed to recognizing how those tools, skills, and knowledges find application in cultural work and institutions beyond the academic.” Again, I agree with you that the conflation of English (and scholarship focused on texts) with the humanities more generally may blur this picture somewhat. I don’t hear as much obliviousness to these questions among my colleagues in technocultural studies

and the like. But I do wonder, outside of the introduction to grad studies class for English PhDs I just taught, how awareness of the fact that we are training media managers might affect what I do in the classroom and what we do in our PhD exams.

How, I guess I'm wondering, should the novel fact that a "humanities workforce" exists alter our pedagogical practice? Asking this question seems a good way to shake off the paralyzing insistence that the humanities are about to unravel. In any case, it would give us something more productive to worry about than Bérubé's insistence that nobody loves us, that "When we look at the academic-job market for humanists, we can't avoid the conclusion that the value of the work we do ... simply isn't valued by very many people, on campus or off."

John

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## Crisis, Crisis, Crisis

Dear John,

The latest "stark appraisal" of humanities crisis comes from MLA president Michael Bérubé. According to [this article](#) in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Bérubé recently pulled back the curtain for Graduate School Deans to show them the mess in their humanities departments and let them know that they better take action soon. Bérubé depicts a "seamless garment of crisis, in which, if you pull on any one thread, the entire thing unravels." The dimensions of this garment are familiar:

overproduction of graduate students, casualization of the professorate, and curricula that seem to exacerbate the glut of PhDs as opposed to preparing them for careers that will allow them to support families and repay loans.

Bérubé deserves praise for encouraging his audience to undertake a systematic appraisal. This is so despite the fact that one inevitable consequence of all this crisis talk is the conclusion—voiced by one commenter on the Bérubé piece—that the humanities are for suckers. If job prospects in academe are so bad, if humanities PhD's are so irrelevant outside academe, if this really is no secret—haven't you been reading *The Chronicle* for the last decade!—and if you decide to pursue a humanities PhD anyway, well then, you deserve the life of poverty and self-loathing to which you have consigned yourself. While those Humanities Garments may look mighty fine, closer inspection should have told you they would leave you naked and cold.

While we've still got our clothes on, let's see if our efforts on this blog can add anything to the portrait of “humanities in crisis” *The Chronicle* promotes in its report. I think we might make two main points.

First, Humanities or English? According to the [Humanities Indicators](#) project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, English produces by far the most [PhDs in the Humanities](#): 26.9% in 2007. The Indicators project includes History in the Humanities, and it is the nearest competitor of English, with 18.6% of the completions. Presumably, the English share would look even larger with History taken out. Clearly, trouble in English spells trouble for this sector as a whole. It still would be interesting to know if humanities disciplines other than English do a better or worse job of calibrating their curricula and enrollments to job placements inside and outside academe. We know why this question is so rarely asked. English has a long-standing, well-developed, and well-reported apparatus for tracking completions and job



openings. The apparatus is sustained not only by its professional association, the MLA, but also by Federal data collection schemes like IPEDS, which, as I began to explain in a [previous post](#), make it easier to know about “English” than “the Humanities” and the smaller divisions thereof. Moreover, as we discovered in our investigation of the Red Book ([thread](#)), English also has a well-established habit of speaking for the humanities in general. Still, it seems to me that enough information might be out there to begin to conduct a meaningful comparative analysis. One issue that analysis might consider is the problem of scale itself: is bigger better when one considers academic and non-academic placements for humanities PhD’s by discipline?

Second, alternatives exist. *The Chronicle* is probably reductive in reporting Bérubé to say that “there is little sense of what viable alternatives to academic employment might be” for humanities PhDs. We have some idea. Again, the Humanities Indicators project provides interesting data on the [career paths](#) of humanities PhD’s by discipline. It reports, for example, that about 38% of English PhDs completed since 1995 are employed outside post-secondary education. The biggest single chunk of these, 14.1%, are “Managers, Executives, Administrators” (i.e., probably not naked and cold). Bérubé’s right, I’m sure, in noting that humanities PhD curricula are not explicitly designed to produce managers. That they seem to do so all the same wants examination, not denial. [David Laurence](#) importantly observes in his analysis of Humanities Indicators data that the very idea of a “humanities workforce” that can be tracked and cultivated amounts to a major policy innovation. We’ve been arguing that the rhetorical opposition of “the humanities” to the culture industries, while sometimes effectively self-serving for the humanities disciplines, has long masked a common endeavor to manage populations by managing media. Seems like a good time for that argument.

Mark

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### 3. Humanists Should Inhabit the Present, not the Early Republic

Dear John,

After too long a hiatus, let me try to pick up this thought where you left off. You wondered about the complex genealogy of this quotation and marveled at its ability to balance (which is to say manage) Jeffersonian and Jacksonian imperatives:

*An ideal but not impossible vision of American society might see it as made up of myriad smaller societies representing between them all the arts and insights, all the duties and self-dedications, of civilized men. It would be in order that they might participate in some of these, quite as much as for making a living, that education would prepare young people, and this participation would in turn be the door to the good life. (98)*

I think I can fill in some of the genealogy. To me the quotation highlights the some the more troubling aspects of Red Book rhetoric.

In particular, it dodges the central governance question. The idea here, I take it, is that the perception of civilized unity inculcated by general education will allow the myriad small societies to work in concert to open that good-life

door. Yet all actually existing societies I know about comprise groups with competing practices, values, and interests, even if they may be said to be united by other practices, values, and interests. The Red Book's authors may hope that general education will provide a foundation for the adjudication of competing group interests. They do not, however, envision plausible mechanisms whereby generally educated Americans might meaningfully participate in such feats of adjudication, nor is such judgment the kind of thing that general education in the humanities or social sciences seems particularly designed to encourage. The emphasis is on unifying works of durable value. If general education does not equip generally educated citizens to question what is meant by "the good life" and for whom, then "unity" and "civilization" become alibis for the status quo.

In the hope that functioning small societies might through a vague process of magnetic conduction improve the common weal, I hear the echoes of Charles Beard's college textbook *American Government and Politics*, which went through six editions between 1911 and 1931. Beard taught Arthur Schlesinger, the historian on the Red Book collective, when the later was a graduate student at Columbia in the early 1910s. It may be Schlesinger who gives the Red Book its organizing "Jeffersonian" and "Jacksonian" metaphors. His autobiography could offer a clue. In any case, in an epilog entitled "How can citizens play well their part in the development of American political society?," the 1931 edition of *American Government and Politics* confronts a problem of bureaucracy that Beard had addressed the year before in *American Leviathan*. To wit: the machinery of the state has grown too vast, and its mechanisms too sophisticated, to be susceptible to informed direction by the masses of citizens. The sorts of participation idealized in the Early Republic's vision of democracy—public debate, elections, and so on—seem feeble in the face of increasingly sophisticated public relations efforts by political parties and pressure

groups, not to mention an ever-increasing number of bureaus only nominally controlled by elected officials. How could young citizens hope to affect a political culture so obviously controlled by experts paid to control it? Beard's advice is to join "small societies"—political parties as well as business, professional, labor, and civic groups—and to hope to influence the broader direction of politics by influencing these smaller groups.

I am proposing that the Red Book marks itself as a twentieth-century work in its hope that the kind of political participation that we might think of as a hallmark of neo-liberalism will secure the type of republic idealized by classical liberalism. In the US context, probably all wishes along these lines respond in one way or another to the argument between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey inaugurated by Lippmann's 1922 *Public Opinion*. I've written about this at length elsewhere (in *Love Rules*), and I won't drag you through it all again. We may never know a more effective critic of Jeffersonian ideals than Lippmann, who treats the entire edifice as a massive PR exercise that convinced Americans to confuse the procedures outlined in the Constitution with self-governance. The PR machine was perfected under Jackson, he argues, when the political parties learned how to use Jeffersonian imagery to legitimate themselves. Henceforth, voting on agendas shaped and decided behind closed doors could count as public rule. Lippmann's overarching critique centers on the power of media to define what citizens can know about the world that they are invited to help "govern." Famously, for Lippmann media do not promote communication so much as circulate stereotypes—reductive views of the world that get mistaken for the world itself. After Lippmann, I think, any serious argument about democracy had to take on board a theory of mediation. Certainly Dewey does in his riposte, which advocates a program of continuous community-building education more radical than the Red Book authors could countenance, but that probably informs their appeal to education as an

instrument of unity.

In later posts, we'll deal with the Red Book's limited treatment of mass culture as a competitor to general education in uniting American society. Here, I'll just note that the issue of mediation is a serious and indicative omission from their account of general education's supposed democratic benefit. To change how people are governed requires changing the shared signs and symbols that make modern governance possible. I think it possible that the Red Book authors know this perfectly well and see themselves as engaged in such an adventure. They just don't think that knowledge about how this works this should be part of general education. Their proposed course on American Democracy, for example, leaps over the Lippmann-Dewey debate. Students will read only defenses of classic liberalism: Tocqueville, Bryce, and Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (219).

References to Jefferson and Jackson make it seem like the Red Book authors are talking about education's contribution to a long heritage of American democracy. They are not. As they sometimes acknowledge explicitly, they are really talking about the role of expanding twentieth-century educational institutions in identifying and encouraging talent and in defining and inculcating social norms. In this project, educational institutions have a great many competitors as well as collaborators. A real commitment to democracy would require an educational program encouraging much harder questions of actually existing governance in the present.

All that said, good management must agree that education should be about more than making a living, that it should encourage people to discover affiliations with one another, and such affiliations ought to renew the evergreen challenge of "the good life."

Mark

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## 3. Humanists Should Aspire to Balance (which is to say Manage) Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Imperatives

Dear Mark,

I've been struggling with the scale of item 3. I'd love to suggest that this was mostly your fault, but you're totally right that the Redbook authors are the ones responsible for binding matters of governmentality, normalization, and the notion of merit. We would do well to recognize that accomplishment. You wrote,

*3. In claiming "the opportunity to rise through education to the level of one's merits" as a unifying force, Harpham rhetorically sublates tendencies the Red Book presents as opposites in need of balancing. Centrally, it weighs the "Jeffersonian" principle of "discovering and giving opportunity to the gifted student" against the "Jacksonian" principle of "raising the level of the average student" (27). The authors stake the nation's future on balancing these opposing imperatives: "The hope of the American school system, indeed of our society, is precisely that it can pursue two goals simultaneously: give scope to ability and raise the average. Nor are these two goals so far apart, if*

*human beings are capable of common sympathies” (35). “Unity” thus becomes the central problem, and “general education,” its instrument. Harpham does not err in pointing out that Red Book-era rhetoric made meritocracy, democracy, and training in the humanities appear to coincide. But he empties that achievement and reduces it, precisely, to a cliché, by underplaying the “Jacksonian” imperative. No merit without normalization, the Red Book reminds us. If the Jeffersonian principle looks to individuals, the Jacksonian considers populations. General education, in contrast to Jeffersonian specialized education, was to be a unifying instrument for populations, and not so much a meritocratic one for individuals. “Democracy” in the Red Book is not centrally a problem of “self-government,” rather, it is a question of proper training, a management proposition (see, e.g., 93).*

You would make managers of us all.

Certainly, the contemporary tendency is to separate Jeffersonian and Jacksonian imperatives rather than to balance them.

Exhibit A: pressure on community colleges to stop thinking of themselves as part of higher ed more generally and consider themselves a venue where people are trained for “middle-skill jobs.” Writing in [The New York Times](#), Joe Nocera argues that for community colleges the “raison d’être has always been to help grease the wheels of social mobility.” Once, “in their earlier incarnation,” community colleges did this by serving as “a passageway to a university degree. (They used to be called junior colleges, after all.)” Now, however, “with the skills gap such a pressing problem – and a high school education so clearly inadequate for the modern economy – the task of teaching those skills is falling to community colleges. There really isn’t another institution as well positioned to play that role.” Nocera seems fine with that. Better than fine: “Community colleges can be our salvation, if

only we let them.” To think of community colleges this way brackets “training” as well as Jackson. Training here includes, “important soft skills that the upper-middle-class take for granted, like how to interact with colleagues in an office setting.” Behave like a Jefferson, even if your average ability keeps you from attending his university. (You wrote in your last post that “The proposition that a healthy nation needs general education that includes the humanities is alive and well.” I don’t disagree, but do think we’re in the process of restricting who gets that general education beyond high school.)

Exhibit B: we are tasked with understanding how democracy and higher ed intersect every time the liberal arts college gets exported to non-democratic polities (NYU in Abu Dhabi, etc.). We are further compelled to wonder if Jacksonian principles of raising the average are in peril in the likes of Quebec, where the daily protests of French-speaking college students and would-be college students have garnered administrative/governmental responses ranging from [stick](#) (managing the blow of tuition increases with new formats for student debt) to [bigger stick](#) (new laws that criminalize protest). Much talk in the papers recently about whether and how the student strikes will shape elections in the fall. Is this the democracy the Redbook was talking about?

Your point, regardless of whether these ripped from the headlines Exhibits seem germane, was that Harpham underplays the Jacksonian side of the equation. “No merit without normalization, the Red Book reminds us,” you write in 3. And in your last post you continued the thought in claiming,

*We have not arrived at a new day in which established defenses of general education, talent, and “critique” have lost all traction. What has broken down are the mechanisms conjoining these rhetorics (ideologies?) with the actual practice of humanists, who look most out of touch not in the content of our scholarship (who reads most of it anyway?),*



*but in the institutional configurations we tend to defend. Defend is the right word. Where's the offense? This [Chronicle](#) headline may be relevant.*

It is possible that the bond market agrees with you. [Moody's](#) not only expects "governance and leadership clashes to increase in coming years as the [education] sector's ability to grow revenues dwindles," but also argues that at UVA "the final resolution affirms the stability of the university's faculty-centric governance model that will allow it to continue to effectively compete with the nation's leading universities for top students, faculty, research grants and philanthropic support."

"'Democracy' in the Red Book is not centrally a problem of 'self-government,'" you argue, "rather, it is a question of proper training, a management proposition (see, e.g., 93)".

I agree with this and find it offers tantalizing propositions to rethink the role of faculty as managers and maybe even teaching as a form of administration. The Redbook authors urge us to "hold firmly in mind the final purpose of all education: to improve the average and speed the able while holding common goals before each" (90). That is, absolutely, a management problem. It can be difficult to think about the relationship between what goes on in the undergraduate classroom or in the curriculum with what is happening in boardrooms at UVA and in the streets of Montreal. I wonder how much that disconnect owes to the conceptual separation of teaching and service (as the administrative portion of our job is bizarrely known), and with the institutional bifurcation of managerial and professorial labor. I'll lean just slightly farther out on this branch with help from an entry to that [Chronicle](#) forum on inequality. Anthony Carnevale [asserts](#) that "College education is becoming a passive participant in the reproduction of economic privilege. Taken one at time, postsecondary institutions are fountains of opportunity; taken together,

they are a highly stratified bastion of privilege.” The problem here, it seems, is one of passivity as much as inequality. Or, the problem is passivity that keeps us from thinking about the sort of inequality (we call it meritocracy) we’re invested in and could be more aggressively managing.

Let me wind up this (rambling) post with my favorite passage in the Redbook. On page 98, the authors provide a vision of the America they think their model of higher education might produce and reproduce.

*An ideal but not impossible vision of American society might see it as made up of myriad smaller societies representing between them all the arts and insights, all the duties and self-dedications, of civilized men. It would be in order that they might participate in some of these, quite as much as for making a living, that education would prepare young people, and this participation would in turn be the door to the good life.*

There’s surely a complicated genealogy behind this model, but what strikes me is how the Redbook appears to consider the movement of students among classrooms and majors as a kind of training for participation in more various large and small societies upon graduation. What a compelling balance of Jackson and Jefferson: the Jacksonian common goal of Jeffersonian differentiation both organizes the Redbook university and the Redbook society.

John

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## 2. A Jeffersonian Matter? Shrinking colleges, shifting dollars to K-12.

Dear Mark,

Your question 2. about [General Education in a Free Society](#) reads as follows:

*2. In Harpham's account, the Red Book seems of a piece with the good old days of taxpayer supported higher-ed, but by far the strongest funding argument happens in chapter 3, where the authors note that inadequacies in state funding for what we would now call K-12 education mean that "out of every hundred young people between six and nine are good college material but do not reach college" (88). The argument here is not "college for all" but "America needs talent": it is wasting youths that could succeed in college if only their parents could afford to get them through high school. Has Harpham considered that reclaiming midcentury clichés might logically mean shrinking the number of college students and, perhaps, shifting dollars to K-12?*

I am going to treat this as a Jeffersonian question, leaving the Redbook's consistent counterpoint of normalization and the Jacksonian goal of "raising the level of the average student" (27) to our discussion of 3.

I'll speak to my sense of Harpham on this in a moment, but in general I would say two things about the status of "America needs talent."

First, I think the conventional wisdom today outside academia is very much "college for all," with considerable disagreement

on how to fund that goal and whether you get a residential experience to go with your course credits. Populists on the left and right privilege “accessibility.” This term morphs according to the user. A Fox News [editorial](#) supporting the ouster of UVA President Sullivan propounds, “Simply put, high-quality universities have become too expensive and increasingly inaccessible because their presidents and other top leaders have failed to recognize and address the challenges and opportunities posed to their institutions by new technologies.” On the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Morrill Act, the Carnegie Corporation has put out a [press release](#) concerning new poll data that shows “3 out of 4 Americans Feel Higher Education Should Be a Right.”

That may be how Americans feel, but will they pay for it? In California at least K-12 funding is what gets people to the polls. Or so our Governor hopes. He’s using a [threat](#) to cut K-12 spending as a stick to encourage voters to support tax hikes. Meanwhile, we may soon have a state budget that [boosts](#) funding to higher ed if the UC and CSU systems don’t raise tuition any more.

It appeals to me to think of this question of “college for all” v. “America needs talent” in terms of broader thinking about meritocracy. Has college stopped seeming like an engine for generating meritocratic hierarchy? And is that a good thing or a bad thing? There is, I’m hoping, a Chris Hayes [“America After Meritocracy”](#) angle to the question of how humanities cliches relate to the politics of academic funding. Hayes argues that universities have gotten worse at talent spotting as test prep and application coaching programs blur the good and the great (and leave those who cannot pay for test prep and application coaching out in the cold). He goes further, contending that the ideal of meritocratic mobility “runs up against the reality of...the Iron Law of Meritocracy. The Iron Law of Meritocracy states that eventually the inequality produced by a meritocratic system will grow large

enough to subvert the mechanisms of mobility. Unequal outcomes make equal opportunity impossible.”

For Harpham’s part, I confess to not having finished his *The Humanities and the American Dream* yet, but so far the closest he gets to this question is in a chapter adapted from a talk he gave at the University of Richmond. There, he rehearsed the clichés of liberal arts education with its “critiquing, probing, testing, speculating” (132). He ties those skills to professionalization but not to meritocracy per se. The “liberal arts faculty,” he contends, “was brought into being by the desire to professionalize knowledge” (135). He has his eye, I presume, on the mid-century field-definers we talk about too in our work in progress. For liberal arts faculty alarmed about the rise of the professional schools, he argues, “the glass is half-full. For if the liberal arts are already professionalized, then the intrusion of professional education into the curriculum does not constitute a second fall of man, and a productive collaboration may be feasible without either side’s having to capitulate” (136). Of the examples he offers, the executive training team [Movers and Shakespeares](#) is especially intriguing. “A two-person mom-and-pop company,” in Harpham’s characterization, “founded on the premise that in order to be a good leader, one must understand people, and that Shakespeare understood people better than anyone” (139). So many thoughts come to mind. Among them, reflecting back on your post from a couple of weeks ago: here’s Shakespeare as an example for you. Certainly, the humanities in this usage (or English in this usage, lest you accuse me of conflating the humanities and English [perish the thought]), are on the side of professional-managerial differentiation.

As for the Redbook, as you say the authors of this volume see high school as a sorting mechanism, and hope that it makes clear who has the talent to attend college and who is but one of those “young people of average intelligence...not suited for the traditional college,” rather capable of profiting from

“training in agriculture or nursing” (89). Everybody should have the “chances to perfect what is in them,” but what is in some is not in others (98). I think of Althusser here, and of an education apparatus that boots people out into vocational / specialized training as their aptitude allows. The Redbook authors imagine general education as “the trunk of a tree from which branches, representing specialism, go off at different heights, at high school or junior college or college or graduate school—the points, that is, at which various groups end their formal schooling” (102). The smarter you are, the longer you remain general in your education. When you shift to vocational training, you are finding your place on the great tree of merit.

It is fortuitous that Harpham has a tree as well. The faculty in the professional schools, he suggests, have long looked out of their well-appointed offices and asked of the university, “Why aren’t the English teachers treated as the marginal ones, the ornaments rather than the tree?” (135). Who is the tree and who the ornament at UVA if, as some commentators anticipate, the Board of Visitors decide to un-oust Sullivan?

Trees aside, who if anyone has interest in funding meritocracy these days, and how much do our cliches of critique, etc. depend on their capacity to mold the “talent” those Redbook authors think America needs? To answer this question might well tell us how out of sync our cliches really are with the tenor of contemporary conversation about the university.

John

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# For and Against Object-centered Collaboration

Dear Mark (and Ralph),

Mark wrote:

*The image-argument thus encodes the complex proposition that “collaboration” entails an opposition, a “them,” and that the ground for the us-them distinction is inherently unstable. It is easy to break collaborations apart by denying the principle commonality that unites them. It is perhaps equally easy to find alternatively commonalities, grounds for collaboration where none seemed to exist. Which is to say, I suppose, that collaborations exist as they are practiced and not as they are planned or defined.*

Ralph commented:

*First, collaboration involves serious risk, specifically, a risk that one may betray oneself, investing precious effort in projects of little interest or value, or perhaps of interest and value to one’s adversary. To my mind, the sea-change from Ransom’s time has to do with how we might conceive the adversary today, in particular, our inability to identify it with anything as self-contained, objectified, and monolithic as Ransom could or did. However, that increases the risk, making it more likely to be insidious and devastating. (I take this to be no argument against collaboration.)*

All agreed. Collaborations are provisional, sometimes project or segment of project specific, and as bound to schism as they are to growth. All the better.

I do not want to collaborate with Nazis like Louis does in Casablanca and am relieved that Ralph thinks that is not really the risk anymore. Relieved but than on alert, in as much as Ralph says that I can stop worrying about card-carrying goose-stepping Nazis, as it were, but should start worrying about the far riskier proposition that (other than the banks perhaps) our adversaries today are less identifiable than card-carrying goose-stepping Nazis, as it were.

To my mind, this apt description of the risk entailed in collaborating now makes it crucial to question the givens that make our humanities practices identifiable. Not that we need to be in disguise because our adversaries are diffuse and not readily identifiable. But rather because by reconsidering the practices that let us know what we are doing and why, we may prepare ourselves for working on different problems and considering new projects and maybe even getting wise about what it means to collaborate with a diverse array of experts.

Where I am, then, on the object question, given that objects tend to organize our work in the humanities.

### **For the object:**

Objects serve as matters of concern around which collaboration happens and they also are collaborators themselves that facilitate some kinds of work and exclude others. Humanities scholars cluster around objects and things happen. Any limit to the sort of work that can be generated through object-centered study is, as Ralph stipulates, also potentially a strength. Ransom, Ralph writes, "can hardly conceive of his practice apart from what he practices it on, in relation to or with, and vice versa." I have had the good fortune to be invited to join a sizable collaborative endeavor organized around the study of video games called [IMMERSe](#). Across disciplines, on six plus campuses, including "[industry partners](#)," and forecasting myriad projects on an array of [themes](#), this collaboration would be unthinkable without the object, video games.



Ransom, in this regard, is a model.

Mark, you wrote,

*I think Ralph's got a point that no matter how low we estimate Ransom's approach, it is notably self-conscious in saying what English should be as a professional endeavor.*

""

*Do we collaborate with Ransom in trying to figure out 1) what it means to be an English professor and 2) how this could be made more satisfying work? I think we might when we use him to call attention to assumptions that continue to inform the practice of the discipline, even if few current practitioners would explicitly avow the whole "Criticism, Inc." package.*

If memory serves, we credited Ransom like Leavis for doing what everybody says they did: making English reproducible as a university discipline. So in response to your questions, I'd say "Yes" to both 1) and 2). I also think that we are more convinced than many of our colleagues that "Criticism, Inc." is a pretty relevant essay for thinking about what happens in English departments today precisely because English professors are far from being convinced they should give up object-centered practice akin, in many respects, to that promoted by Ransom. Ralph, I take it, is with us on this one. We'd make a comparable argument about the relevance of Leavis, although for a slightly different strain of English professor (a little more Raymond Williams-esque).

To the extent that we can recognize the capacity of object-centered study to organize inter-disciplinary collaboration and departmental formation (itself a collaborative practice), we're intrigued by Ransom et al. We might go farther and say that these Ransom et al. established the default mode of collaboration in English. They helped make it possible (how, exactly...) for English professors to think of themselves as

collaborating most profoundly with the literary objects they study. Such professors do so as part of a collective composed of similar close readers, of course, so even discrete pairs of scholar and poem are part of something bigger. That collaborative model worked for more than a half century, in that it facilitated the growth of English and other similarly collaborative disciplines/departments. Does it still work today?

### **Against the object:**

Objects balkanize the humanities. Their very capacity to help us group into departments and specializations divides and excludes even as it brings certain scholars together. That's not a problem, per se, but it can be in certain circumstances. I think this balkanization tends to be entrenched now, such that it can make more plastic collaborative dynamics hard to fit into our existing institutional structure.

Objects tell us to stay in our lanes. They make us recognizable (film scholar, novel scholar) which can be good but also limiting. Our specialization becomes a kind of professional identity. With all the benefits and costs implied.

I have a fantasy in which we become more specialized and, as a result, less self-sufficient. If we are expert in something really small, doesn't that mean we'll see the greater need to work in groups? To stop pretending that any of us could possibly write a book on our own and to start making more visible collaboration that currently exists the better to manage it in the future?

I'm not interested in reproducing the English department or the humanities as they have been, in short. Objects are part of that legacy I'm willing to consider living without.

### **Living with Hierarchy:**

Mark wrote:

*Collaboration entails an idea of the common good and an epistemological uncertainty about it.*

...

*Graphic Artist Two iconographically invalidates as bad faith Billy's semantic negation of competition, while leaving the imperative "Collaboration!" untouched. I like this second interpretation. It seems to be of a piece with Graphic Artist Two's cynicism: a reminder that while collaboration might be valued over competition it cannot be opposed to it, since would-be-collaborators begin from a position in a competitive hierarchy with which they may unwittingly collaborate despite avowals to the contrary.*

If that's cynicism, then I'm cynical. There's nothing about collaborative practice that mandates equality even if collaboration invokes the common good in principle. We're talking about collaboration that takes place within and connected to the university, a meritocratic institution, a hierarchy-generating machine. Unless we think meritocracy just completely incompatible with the common good, we're stuck with something like this dynamic. And something like this critique. No?

John