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What Matters

The question of “what matters” in humanities higher education has taken on a new urgency in the face of increasing pressures on colleges and universities to demonstrate a return on parental, state, donor, alumni, and student investment. In spite of some low-hanging but magically-protected fruit, such as athletic programs, administrative salaries, and the notorious, metonymic climbing wall, institutional leaders often look instead to save money on undergraduate education since its quality and effectiveness have limited impact on the rankings that, ironically, have accumulated great significance for prospective students. So instead of paring down to focus tightly on their educational mission, too often institutions pit German against engineering and art against business, weighing the value of continuing to hire faculty and admit students into these different disciplines. In this environment humanists, who cannot always demonstrate immediate links between courses of study and financial success, have lately been feeling beleaguered. Certainly there has been complaining, but there have also been sincere and promising efforts to reflect on our value, to advocate for our importance, and to better articulate what we offer to society. The Teagle Foundation Convening in June asked participants to consider both “what works” and “what matters”; in the process, it revealed how important it will be going forward to think about these questions together.

Most disciplines within the humanities have highly developed, sophisticated, and sometimes even contentious debates about curriculum (what matters), but we have traditionally tended to pay minimal attention to whether or not our carefully-crafted programs have the
desired impact on students. Presentations on “what works” varied widely at this conference, but consistently returned to strategies for student engagement. Students learn better, presenters agreed, when given the opportunity to make discoveries and take responsibility for their own education. This can achieved through both time-tested methods and more innovative strategies. Richard Light suggested pop quizzes and cold calling to keep students on their toes. Richard Arum reminded us that we need to keep standards high and demand more writing and reading from students. At the same time, new technologies are providing new opportunities. Judith Shapiro discussed the intriguing Reacting to the Past program developed at Barnard during her presidency, in which students take the role of historical actors at major turning points, such as the French Revolution or Cherokee Removal in 1835. Katherine Rowe described how a colleague has undergraduates compare digitized copies of the earliest printings of Renaissance plays to edited or keyboarded versions as a way not only to learn about the evolution of a received edition, but to become part of production of more accurate texts. Terrell Rhodes and Elizabeth Clark described how electronic portfolios can not only provide crucial information about students for internal research, but can also prompt students to take responsibility for their own education. Electronic portfolios not only provide faculty with more nuanced information about the student experience, but give students a new way to create stories about their own lives.

Throughout the conference, then, there was a highly productive “Marketplace of Ideas,” as the program promised, regarding how learning could be improved. I was struck by the welcome absence of certain shopworn controversies. No impassioned debates bubbled up over the superiority of digital vs. “traditional” teaching strategies. No one seemed to think that the internet would save the world, or at least the humanities; at the same time, no one represented new technologies as the handbasket in which we will be transported to the underworld of
instrumentality, alienation, and short attention spans. More to the point, there was a tacit recognition, I think, that the technology bore minimal controversy in itself; the key point instead was the recognition that students learn better when actively engaged, which can happen—or fail to happen—in a variety of technological contexts. When the collaborative goal becomes the improvement of student learning, then other conflicts seem much less important. In this sense, the conference actually modeled the kinds of goals to which many of the speakers referred: a community of teacher-scholars thinking together, out loud, about how to improve student learning.

Also notably absent was the once impassioned conflict over the value of learning outcomes assessment itself. In his closing remarks, Richard Morrill reminded us of the difference between the June 2012 convening and another Teagle Foundation convening held four years ago (which I also attended) in North Carolina. In the 2008 meeting, discussion focused on the challenges of getting questions of assessment and student learning on the table at all, and to thinking through the central problem of faculty resistance to change. Looking back, it seems that one of the foundation’s strategies might have been to prompt grantees to think about how the new shock of accountability could be turned into productive discussion and active reform. Why wouldn’t you want to know, many at the New York conference might have asked, whether or not students were learning? Accountability still comes up on discussions of the assessment, but perhaps it has become a less volatile issue. The North Carolina conference, by contrast, featured a session with the mock-alarmist title “The Accreditors are Coming; The Accreditors are Coming!”, in which panelists discussed the scramble to prepare for accreditation visits (and how that energy might be used productively). In a keynote address, Judith Eaton, President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, discussed the Institution-Accreditor
Partnership: Assessment and Quality Improvement and Peter Ewell offered insights into What Makes Change Hard. Ewell considered this problem in a session called “To the Tipping Point.” Conversations throughout the North Carolina conference continually returned to the Spellings report and even to concerns over the possibility of new forms of federal regulation.

There were no accreditors at the New York meeting, and no discussion of accreditation on the panels. If the North Carolina conference had the tipping point in view, the New York conference wasn’t looking back. This is good news, not because the accountability movement “won,” but because the Teagle Foundation, other groups, and heroic efforts on individual campuses have produced a community of teacher-scholars who are thinking about “what works and what matters” rather than gaping at the specter of accreditation. Of course, even if such a community now exists, much work remains to be done. A panel called “Assessing Assessment,” organized for the 2012 meeting of the Modern Languages Association in January, reminded me how far many institutions have to go, and also why so many faculty members detest this process. On this panel, one presenter rather cynically reported how much he had delighted his administration by making big charts tracking student grades and showing their steady improvement as evidence for the increase of student learning. An attendee in the audience shared that her institution had hired an assessment expert who outlined all of the learning goals for the academic programs. While nearly all instructors, as Derek Bok reminded us in his keynote address at the 2008 North Carolina meeting, want their students to learn, reports at the MLA meeting from faculty on the ground remind us how bad assessment practices can destroy any sense of connection between larger institutional goals and faculty efforts. Without denying, then, that much work remains in this area, the difference between the North Carolina meeting and the recent meeting in New York suggests that scholars, teachers, and administrators have
been spending less time thinking about how to come up with arguments for the importance of student learning and more time forging ahead with questions about what might make a difference.

When presenters took up the topic of positive change, we heard fewer war stories and more reflections on the process. One persistent theme that emerged was campus “culture,” which apparently “eats strategy for breakfast.” What moves faculty to implement more effective strategies, whether the power source involves a plug, a battery, or a strong cup of coffee? Charlie Blaich, Jillian Kinzie, and David Paris each in different ways emphasized the importance of campus cultures in the promotion of student learning. Jillian Kinzie noted the importance of leaders: students do well, she reported, when the faculty trusts the leadership, and when the leaders themselves show a commitment to student learning. Trust in leadership allows faculty to develop and take risks. David Paris proposed that institutions need to find ways to temper the traditional individualism on campuses with a movement toward community. The health and civility of this community, Charles Blaich argued, becomes crucial to student learning. At productive institutions, as Blaich put it, “people are nice to each other.”

Not everyone finds themselves, of course, in situations with good leadership, institutional commitments to learning, and an atmosphere of general civility. As the discussion brought out, too many institutions are plagued by the opposite. James Grossman noted that professors, perhaps uniquely, distinguish between the work of their institutions and work they call “their own.” In thinking about the value of student learning, the problem runs even deeper. While it is impossible not to agree with Jillian Kinzie about the importance of visibly committed leadership, it is probably also safe to say that most faculty members have very little institutional, structural, or cultural incentive to think about whether or not their students are learning, a theme that
emerged consistently throughout the conference discussion. In the humanities, rewards at some institutions come mainly from publication. At others where teaching figures into the reward structure, administrators and committees often rely on student evaluations—or what Richard Arum suggests we call “student satisfaction surveys.” In his view, these surveys offer minimal information about student learning and even contribute to suppressing standards and inflating grades. As Arum and a few others pointed out during the conference, in some cases the incentives are not just absent but downright perverse. If students think that your course assigns too many papers, as Carol Geary Schneider pointed out, at most institutions they can walk down the hall and find a class with fewer demands. The tyranny of student evaluations student satisfaction surveys encourages us to demand less and grade high. It stands to reason that the erosion of tenure contributes to this problem as well, as contingent faculty members who receive lower scores from students risk losing their jobs.

Presenters and attendees thus identified crucial challenges that lie ahead. Nevertheless, perhaps the question of “what works” (and what needs to work better) has become, with some serious qualification, an overall—dare we say?—easier conversation to have than four years ago. Simultaneously, though, for the humanities the question of “what matters” has become more vexing. Andrew Delbanco wondered aloud whether or not students still have needs that the humanities can meet when the debates in the public sphere that traditionally inspired these needs have become more and scarce. Carol Geary Schneider pointed out that all of the liberal arts (humanities, arts, and sciences) only claim 30% of undergraduate majors. In a pre-circulated essay, Richard Morrill noted the continuing decline of the number of graduate students in the humanities, raising concerns for the future as well as the present: “The increasingly public preoccupation with professional and vocational studies coupled with the steady growth in
specialization in academic fields has challenged the commitment to broad and integrated programs of study in the arts and sciences, especially the humanities. . . . Taken together with continuing economic stagnation in the wider society and sharply reduced university budgets, many humanities and other subjects have undergone a series of sharp cuts. Reflecting these tough realities, the number of graduate students in the humanities continues to decline, and by factors of 50% to 70% in some fields in a number of large departments.” We might take the shrinking number of graduate students as a sign that institutions have been making an effort to align graduate programs with a job market for tenure-track assistant professors that has been miserable for years. The shrinking of graduate programs and the decline of tenure-line positions in humanities field, however, might be less a result of diminished student interest than—and this point was made by Andrew Delbanco and taken up by Rosemary Feal in the q&a—a result of too many institutions turning away from the tenure system and relying on contingent faculty for much of the teaching. Thus, it could be simultaneously true that students remain interested in the humanities, that tenure-track positions have declined, and that graduate programs have begun to align admissions with the depressed market.

While the details of the problem continue to be debated, there nevertheless has been a widespread sense in humanities fields that less and less support has been available, a point that several presenters addressed. Richard Detweiler threw down the gauntlet fairly early in the conference by arguing that the humanities are destroying the humanities. We have long been accustomed to this argument about scholarship in the humanities, but Detweiler was making a different point. The problem, he proposed, is that the ideals of the humanities promote the opposite of good pedagogy. The humanities have traditionally emphasized solitary scholarship and the mastery of knowledge as the foundation for research. But what tends to work best
pedagogically is instead collaboration, clear learning goals, and students as active constructors of knowledge and partners in inquiry. These are strategies that, according to Detweiler, have made fewer inroads into the humanities than perhaps in other disciplines. Humanists, he argued, have to change the way they teach instead of repeating unconvincing platitudes about the value of their disciplines.

When the conference turned explicitly to the questions of “what matters,” then, I was alert to see if we confirmed, complicated, undermined, or refuted Detweiler’s unhappy characterization. Martha Nussbaum opened the discussion by making the case that the humanities are necessary to a democratic society. Humanistic study develops three crucial capacities: the ability to deliberate well about political issues, the ability to think about the good of the nation as a whole, and the ability to see the nation as part of a larger world. Nussbaum cited psychological studies documenting the human tendency to fall into hierarchical relationships; in particular, she emphasized the dangerous tendency to defer to authority and submit to peer pressure. Societies populated by such unreflective thinkers cannot maintain democratic principles, she pointed out. They become capable of terrible injustices, and even atrocities. Thriving democracies, by contrast, need educated citizens with highly developed critical thinking skills. Humanities disciplines in general, and perhaps, as evidenced by most of her examples, philosophy in particular, cultivate the kind of critical thinking that democracies need. The study of literature, she added, cultivates sympathy, “the enemy of hierarchy.” Along these lines, Nussbaum also discussed the “Capabilities” movement (about which she has written and, with Amartya Sen and Kaushik Basu, led). This movement offers a critique of development work that uses GDP as the primary index of value, a choice that reduces human needs to the economic and overlooks the crucial value of dignity and self-respect. The humanities, then,
must be recognized for their vital contribution to these non-economic aspects of life.

Respondent Elizabeth Minnich elaborated on the importance of seeing the world from the point of view of the “other” in both local and global contexts, and how Nussbaum’s work has for many years called attention to the capacity of the humanities to help us do this. Minnich underscored Nussbaum’s emphasis on higher education’s responsibility for preparing students for citizenship rather than a job market; she called on us to avoid the “evil of banality” in the form of reducing education to careerism. A second respondent, Elizabeth Camp, concurred with Nussbaum on the thinness of a life defined by the economic. While she agreed with Nussbaum over the need to resist instrumental thinking, though, she also pointed out that employers also want critical thinkers who see new ways into problems.

It would be impossible not to agree with the worthy goals expressed on this panel. Still, the welcome advocacy for the humanities did not address the persistent problem raised by other presentations of the gap between faculty enthusiasm and student learning, public skepticism, and unsupportive institutional priorities. One member of the audience questioned the claim that the humanities in particular develop critical thinking skills. What about the social sciences? If the value of the humanities lies mostly in the cultivation of critical thinking and sympathy, would the humanities become unnecessary if these goals could be reached in other ways? Do they have any other value? We might add to these queries about critical thinking some challenges to the claim that reading novels cultivates sympathy to the point of liberation from peer pressure and hierarchy. On the one hand, Steven Pinker has recently made an intriguing case that the eighteenth-century sentimental novel helped precipitate the change he calls “the rights revolution,” which included feminism, abolition, and campaigns for the better treatment of animals. These novels, he argues, gave readers insight into the feelings of the vulnerable,
contributing to concern for their well-being. It’s hard to know, though, whether the novel caused this change, or if both the development of the novel and the rights revolution rose from similar historical conditions that made them possible. Also, it’s hard to dismiss Stanley Fish’s response in another context to the expanded version of this hypothesis that studying the humanities makes you a better person: “If it were true, the most generous, patient, good-hearted and honest people on earth would be the members of literature and philosophy departments, who spend every waking hour with great books and great thoughts, and as someone who’s been there (for 45 years) I can tell you it just isn’t so.” At this conference of experienced student learning insurgents (to borrow Charlie Blaich’s excellent phrase), there was much dismayed recollection well-crafted strategy, to return to Drucker’s oft-quoted insight, devoured for breakfast by readers of Samuel Richardson and Immanuel Kant.

Since so much of the first part of the conference explored the problem of student learning and the all of the hard work between setting goals and the successful transformation in student development, the absence of this crucial intermediary step when turning to these larger goals of the humanities was salient, although perhaps it would not have been in another context. I raise this not as a shortcoming of this panel, which was tackling different issues, but as a symptom of a larger problem that I think often bedevils defenses of the humanities and observations of the “crisis” in the humanities. In addressing these issues, I think, we need to distinguish between the humanities themselves—the distinctive ways of thinking and great works that we love and want to pass down to the next generation—and the opportunity to learn about the humanities in institutional settings. If it were true, in other words, that reading novels cultivates sympathy and that reading philosophical dialogues cultivates reason, then all we would need to do is distribute texts and reading lists. But literature and philosophy themselves are not under attack in the
current climate, at least not in any obvious way. While Lydia Languish in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s play *The Rivals* (1775) rushes to hide her stacks of novels under the couch when she hears her aunt approaching, most parents and guardians these days think that such books are good for their young charges. What *does* seem vulnerable, however, is the traditional consensus regarding the place of the humanities in the undergraduate curriculum—a problem related to, but not identical with, an attack on the humanities.

The next two panels offered some insight into this problem, turning to “What Matters in Teaching and Learning in the Humanities: Crisis or Opportunity?” Andrew Delbanco framed a discussion of “What are the Humanities For?” with some of challenges we currently face. At the top of his list was, as mentioned, the increasing reliance on contingent faculty for instruction, a crucial issue whose relationship to student learning clearly needs more attention. If, as suggested by the first half of the conference, institutions are indeed thinking about student learning more seriously than in the past, then the stability of the faculty needs to be part of that discussion. While underscoring Nussbaum’s concerns about how greed and narcissism are competing with compassion, Delbanco nevertheless stressed that we now live and teach in a world in which the value of our subject cannot be taken for granted. As a result, instructors need to take responsibility for conveying to students their own sense of the beauty and excitement of the humanities.

While most analyses of the “crisis in the humanities” look to external factors, Russell Berman, as if in answer to Detweiler’s earlier challenge, asked us to look inward, making three bracing points. First, he argued, we need to ask ourselves whether or not our teaching is as effective as it could be. While Berman did not have time to elaborate, it seems clear that we should take this seriously and think about whether or not insufficiently effective teaching has
contributed to the undervaluing of humanities education. Second, in contrast to the speakers on
the previous panel, Berman warned against too much anti-vocationalism. “It is not wrong,” he
argued, “for students to be thinking about getting a job”; there is, then, nothing wrong with
spelling out how skills acquired through humanities degrees can translate into capacities desired
by employers. In fact, the panel’s next speaker, Carol Geary Schneider, reported on research
carried out by the AAC&U demonstrating how closely the abilities desired by today’s employers
align with the learning outcomes for a liberal arts degree. Finally, Berman suggested that we
need to confront the place of humanities education in the context of higher education as a whole.
The percentage of humanities majors, he noted, has remained relatively stable since the 1960,
continuing to hover between 11% and 15%. Realistically, it probably won’t get much bigger. If
we really believe in the benefits of a humanities education, then, we need to get more involved in
general education, reaching out to students who are not majoring in humanities fields. Berman
also tackled what is probably the most difficult issue of all: the place of teaching in career of a
humanities professor. As came up at various points throughout the conference, Berman noted
that many institutions offer little reward for effective teaching. He proposed that we need to get
beyond the science model of the production of new knowledge, which has always been an
awkward fit in humanities disciplines, and redefine ourselves in terms of what we offer to
students. While he did not have time to elaborate on this point either, we might additionally
think about how such a reassessment of disciplinary goals might also address some very real
threats to the careers of graduate students and young professors trying to succeed when
university presses are folding and libraries have diminishing budgets for monographs.
Circulating research online will help somewhat, but the actual printing only represents a tiny
fraction of the cost of book production. Thus, it doesn’t seem out of place to reconsider the
balance of our responsibilities and contributions. Whatever we conclude, it seems to me that the future of humanities education depends on the kind of bracing confrontation that Berman proposes.

Katherine Rowe turned the conversation in a more optimistic direction, arguing that there has “never been a better time to make the case for humanistic abilities.” Students are now faced with a whole world of media and need guidance in making sense of this world. She also suggested that electronic media could be used to enhance student engagement and bring them into active partnerships in scholarly inquiry. There has been, of course, an ongoing debate in humanities fields about opportunities offered by new technologies. I am most familiar with the discussion touching on my own field, literary studies. At around the time of the annual meeting of the MLA, Stanley Fish wrote a series of opinion pieces for the New York Times on whether or not digital studies could “save” the humanities, concluding resoundingly in the negative. While these pieces generated considerable controversy, an excellent post by Ted Underwood made the case that digital studies isn’t actually the “next thing” in literary studies and won’t “save” it, mainly because it does not belong to literary studies in particular or even the humanities in general. It isn’t even “interdisciplinary” in the usual sense; “extra-disciplinary,” he suggested, might be a better word. This is certainly not to argue that we should neglect the opportunities that digital media present for student engagement. Some familiarity with these possibilities, in fact, seems to me to be crucial, although we also need to admire leaders like UVA President Teresa Sullivan who understand that integrating technology needs to be done with thought and care. It seems clear, though, that the pursuit of student engagement through the use of digital media does not belong to the humanities in particular, although it is certainly something that humanities instructors should cultivate and, on the other side, good decisions about technology,
as Rowe’s presentation suggested, demand humanistic input. Insight into the meaning and function of the digital world, however, needs to be a multidisciplinary project or one that, as Underwood’s post might suggest, rearranges in some way the idea of disciplinarity. Thus, like claims about any particular connection between the humanities and critical thinking, the turn to the digital, while equally important, does not belong to humanities disciplines alone and thus does not speak to their particularity.

Putting these three presentations together—critical thinking as a product of the liberal arts (of which the humanities are only one subset); the importance of the sophisticated use of digital tools and opportunities, and the small percentage of students majoring in humanities fields—led more than one conference attendee to consider the possibility of letting go of, or at least not focusing so exclusively, on programs devoted to the humanities. Maybe humanists need to turn away from trying to protect our shrinking piece of turf and instead find ways to integrate our subjects and our disciplinary perspective into many areas of study and education. In some ways this is a frightening thought: I am highly attached to my discipline, my field, my subfield, and my sub-subfield. But to achieve a greater impact on a world that (as pretty much all of the presenters noted) needs humanities education more than ever, maybe we need to think about fanning out a little more.

The final panel of the conference on “Representative Programs in the Humanities,” organized by Donna Heiland, seemed to model this possibility, with one interesting exception. The exception belonged to Jennifer Summit, who told the story of how the English department at Stanford University that she was chairing came to realize that the number of English majors was shrinking (lots of empty chairs at commencement). Majors, it turned out, had fallen by 40%. Laudably, instead of looking to place blame externally, she and her colleagues decided to try to
find out why and to think about what they could do about it. For a greater understanding they
wisely turned to the undergraduates themselves, from whom they gathered three major insights:
that students didn’t know what the English major was about; that they didn’t see how the courses
added up to a defining purpose, and that they saw the English major as lacking in rigor. The
problem, as Summit explained at the conference (and has discussed in greater detail in print) had
in part to do with the history of the English major. In the mid-70s Stanford, slightly ahead of
curve of a greater transition, rejected a traditional undergraduate curriculum based on a stable
sense of canonicity. As the array of written works worth studying broadened, Stanford (and
other departments) moved from a major organized around a limited set of great authors to a more
diverse and less stable model. Instead of a required course in Shakespeare, for example, students
would take a course in Renaissance drama; instead of history serving as the background for
Shakespeare plays, literary and cultural documents could be integrated into one course. While
this new kind of curriculum expressed more fully the faculty’s updated understanding of their
discipline, it also unfortunately replaced the (now-impossible) coverage model with one that
Summit aptly called “sampling”—as in, two courses before 1750, two after 1750, etc. The
sampling approach gave rise to the undergraduate sense of incoherence, even though each course
provided some kind of productive unity on its own terms. In the end, the department addressed
this problem by releasing seminars from historical distribution and requiring a year-long course
on literary history that is not a survey but characterized by “broad, synthetic perspectives and
organized around literary-historical throughlines and paradigm shifts” (Summit 51). Faculty
created each version of the course through significant collaboration, identifying both knowledge
and skills as the learning outcome goals. Thus the department moved toward a more
collaborative model of learning, adding the skill of “historical thinking” to the accumulation of a knowledge base.

There is much to admire in this project and in the faculty collaboration that it evidences. Discussing historical thinking conceptually, rather than haphazardly in individual courses, could make a big difference in the way students read works from the past. Still, the revised model does not seem radically different from other English majors with which I am familiar. Most English literature programs have some kind of introduction to the major intended to provide coherence and make some kind of attempt to coordinate the different sections (with varying degrees of success). Perhaps the difference here is that the Stanford department is concentrating on literary history rather than methodology, which is often the focus of such introductory courses. The Stanford course will include representative works from different periods, but “What defines a work as representative is determined each year by the team that is teaching the course and by the throughlines it elects to pursue” (51). This flexibility will assure a broader input; nevertheless, if each team chooses its own representative texts and throughlines for each iteration of the course, then how does the course different significantly from the sampling model? How, for example, would the class of 2013’s throughline on “colonialism, gender, and desire” articulate with the class of 2014’s throughline on “cognition and imagination” (51)? Instead of avoiding conflict by adding new fields, as Gerald Graff has characterized English department strategies, the Stanford major avoids conflict by taking turns with different models of coherence. I am not suggesting that such a course should instead have one eternal throughline or a single set of representative texts. I also think that the devil (and the angel) will be in the detail of this course, and that simply by organizing it collaboratively and across fields Summit and her faculty have made a huge leap forward. And maybe conflict is overrated. Nevertheless, the persistent “sampling”
nature of this model suggests the difficulty of the problem that this department has heroically confronted, which has to do with the challenge of designing a coherent English major when the category of literature itself can no longer be taken for granted.

While challenges clearly persist in designing humanities majors, other papers on the panel reported on productive and engaging interdisciplinary teaching projects. Rev. Richard Ryscavage explained how he used novels and films as part of a course teaching undergraduates how to become responsible humanitarians. While students often begin with the impulse to do some good in the world, sometimes they have no idea how to go about this, and can fail to recognize the ways in which some forms of aid can degrade the very people it is deployed to assist. Films and novels, he argued, often do a better job of allowing students to grasp the complexity of another’s perspective than would any attempt to teach the abstract principles of dignity and respect. From a more programmatic perspective, Roosevelt Montas discussed the core curriculum in the humanities at Columbia University that is, in some ways, the opposite of the program at Stanford in that it brings faculty and students together to discuss a set group of texts. As the curriculum website describes,

The Core Curriculum is the set of common courses required of all undergraduates and considered the necessary general education for students, irrespective of their choice in major. The communal learning--with all students encountering the same texts and issues at the same time--and the critical dialogue experienced in small seminars are the distinctive features of the Core. . . . Not only academically rigorous but also personally transformative for students, the Core seminar thrives on oral debate of the most difficult questions about human experience. What does it mean, and what has it meant to be an individual? What does it mean, and what has it meant to be part of a community? How is human experience relayed and how is meaning made in music and art? What do we think is, and what have we thought to be worth knowing? By what rules should we be governed? The habits of mind developed in the Core cultivate a critical and creative intellectual capacity that students employ long after college, in the pursuit and the fulfillment of meaningful lives.
As Montas explained, these are difficult questions and also difficult learning outcomes goals to assess; all such engagements will be experimental. Nevertheless, students benefit, he argued, from the experience of reading a shared set of texts that raise these big questions. These required courses generate conversations across the campus and create social cohesion. The study of primary texts in chronological order, Montas argued, highlights some of the things that have endured, some of the things that have changed, and some of the ways that humans made sense of their experience. The program’s interdisciplinarity also sparks conversations between the different faculty members who teach in the program and who would not otherwise grapple with a common text. Finally, Judith Shapiro explained the “Reacting to the Past” program, discussed earlier in this report. As already mentioned, this ingenious program puts students in the position of specific historical actors—politicians, writers, philosophers, laborers—and requires them to make decisions at key moments in history. Students rely along the way on both primary and secondary texts, and must negotiate with each other to make collaborative decisions.

The contrast between these varied and creative uses of primary texts and the challenges encountered by Summit’s English department were striking. Outside the English department and particularly in interdisciplinary contexts, the way a novel or a poem or a play addresses the complexity of human experience seemed more or less obvious. Do literature programs have something to learn from these interdisciplinary programs? Or perhaps this observation raises another possibility: that literary study, and humanistic study in general, thrive in interdisciplinary pedagogical contexts. Either way, it was clear from all of the presentations on this panel, including the discussion of the English major at Stanford, that the primary texts most productively acquire meaning and become most valuable in the context of integrative and collaborative learning experiences. The shifting explanatory framework at Stanford will, I
imagine, work just as well as the traditional one at Columbia, although in different ways and for different reasons. What clearly works less well is the failure to offer one in the first place, perhaps an unfortunate feature of too many programs. Also, the particular format emerged as less important than the pedagogical strategy. While “Reacting to the Past” is based on an online program and Ryscavage’s course happens face to face, they both have in common the interactive learning strategies generally associated with effective learning. Both combine individual contemplation with vigorous collaborative engagement. Thus while humanists continue to engage in productive curricular debates, the presentations on this panel point to the innovative ways in which faculty members are hard at work integrating productive strategies into their teaching and their programs.

The convening, then, revealed a variety of perspectives on what mattered most in the humanities in higher education. Some participants emphasized the way humanities education helps prepare students for a world that increasingly demands creativity and critical thinking; some focused on the way the humanities contribute to citizenships; some emphasized how texts can help us imagine situations other than our own. Across these differences, however, most agreed that complacency was not an option: it is no long possible to assume the security of the humanities in higher education. We need to continue to think about how best to keep these disciplines vital and influential, a project that will inevitably involve both serious outreach and rigorous introspection. This introspection needs to take up questions of not just what we teach but how we teach; it needs to confront the insufficient significance granted to effective teaching in faculty careers; it needs to address the extent to which humanities programs offer students ways to see individual courses as aligned with overarching learning goals, intellectual problems, and social challenges. We need to include these discussions in other venues as well: at
professional society meetings, at faculty senate meetings, and in public outreach projects. Given
the challenges to the humanities in higher education, we can no longer assume that the works we
admire will find an audience in the next generation. For this reason and others, we need to find
ways for faculty to continually reinvest in their teaching, and we need to reform institutions to
recognize this work. If we are serious about including outcomes assessment in institutional
practice, we need to make sure that students learning takes place in the best possible conditions,
which include a stable faculty secure in the freedom to challenge students in productive ways.
Because canonical or not, those indispensable literary, cultural and philosophical works aren’t
going to teach themselves.

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Works Cited