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Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

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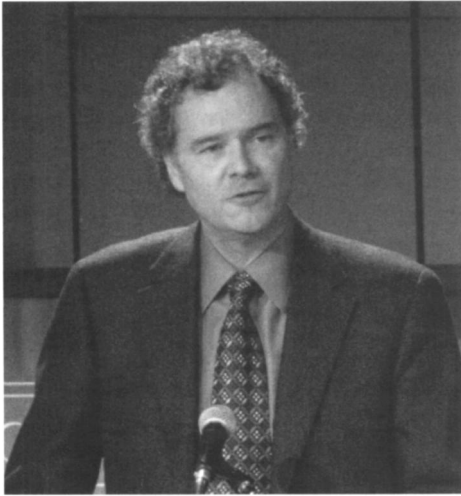
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On the Humanities



Edward L. Ayers

Edward L. Ayers is President of the University of Richmond. He has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 2001.

The Hidden Crisis of the Humanities

Edward L. Ayers

Humanists claim that our disciplines teach us to think about complexity, paradox, and irony. That's good, because the situation we face is filled with all of those elements and others besides. Fortunately, the *Humanities Indicators* from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences give our conversation a sense of proportion and history we have previously lacked. They reveal a surprising situation. Although humanists have tended to dwell on simple dichotomies as the source of our problems – the humanities versus virtually any other field of inquiry, scholarship versus teaching, specialization versus public reach, and innovation versus tradition – the real challenge to the humanities lies elsewhere.

As we look closely at the numbers and trend lines in the *Humanities Indicators*, we see that some things we thought to be in trouble are, in fact, in trouble, particularly the task of finding secure jobs for our new doctorates, who have worked so hard to master their complex fields. Other things, however, that we believe to be in decline, such as the humanities' share of undergraduate enrollments, say, or the number of scholarly books we publish, or an audience for our work outside the traditional classroom, turn out not to be in decline after all.

But some things we have *not* worried about might be worth more attention than we've devoted to them. The humanities are all that their proponents claim them to be in practical terms of preparing people for lives of purpose and accomplishment; but we are not reaching large numbers of first-generation, immigrant, minority, and poor students, and it is time for us to reach out to them in every way available to us. To do so, we need to have a clearer idea of just

what we are about and what we are trying to accomplish.

The *Humanities Indicators* describe the "great and varied archive of the human record" as the subject of humanists' work. That seems exactly right, especially if we add "growing" to "great and varied." Little that humans have thought or recorded is useless; subjects only await their time and their interpreter. In a heartening development, Americans have never been more interested in the world beyond their own nation, and humanists are the people who

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can best explain that remarkably complex world. The human archive becomes greater and more varied every day.

The humanities are the secular memory of the human race. Like individual memory, much of this collective memory, much of the time, seems irrelevant, a kind of static or interference until we suddenly need it. Like personal memory, too, the larger collective memory will fade if we let it, and it will play tricks on us, turning itself into fables, self-serving stories, and flattering mythologies. Memory work can be pleasant, like flipping through an old photo album of pictures we like and want to remember. But memory work can also be harrowing, as we uncover and dwell on things we do not particularly want to remember but simply must. That's what the humanities do.

Though the phrase “the humanities” bears the patina of an ancient Western tradition, the aggregation of disciplines bearing that name is only about a hundred years old, an American invention from early in the twentieth century. The concept grew slowly, taking off after World War II, and the number of undergraduate students taking degrees in the humanities reached its peak in 1972. Like American higher education in general, the humanities suffered in the hard years between 1975 and 1987, but undergraduate enrollments in the humanities began another ascent about then and have generally kept ascending to the present.

No matter how popular some aspects of the humanities may become, the humanities require dedication and focus, and so they require colleges and universities and classrooms.

Anxiety about losing out to other fields notwithstanding, the relative position of the humanities within colleges and universities has not changed appreciably in the last 20 years. Enrollments in business programs float about 10 percentage points above all other undergraduate degrees, as they have for decades, and vocational programs still attract growing numbers of students, but the social sciences, natural sciences, social services, and humanities each consistently enroll about 12 percent of undergraduates. The humanities occupy the middle of the pack on most measures of disciplinary health, from the ethnic and gender diversity of faculty and students to the salaries and degree of satisfaction of graduates.

In the meantime, humanistic information is proliferating on screens of all sorts. The Library of Congress and universities, libraries, and businesses the world over give us access to the humanistic archive in ways unimaginable only 20 years ago. Thanks to

online journals, websites, videos, and inclusive electronic conversations, humanists enjoy a range of venues and audiences unimaginable to those who wrote for a few small magazines in the much-romanticized heyday of public intellectuals.

Humanists have not figured out how to make use of this new profusion of sources and audiences. Right now, we are rather bedazzled and unsophisticated consumers of electronic machinery. We have not yet changed our mode of scholarship or teaching. But we will. We have, after all, the entire record of the human experience to explore and present in a new set of media, media that stretch instantaneously all over the world. Humanists are not quick to change, but these opportunities – and pressures – are too compelling to resist forever.

In the meantime, people are reaching out to the humanities. Highly motivated adult students fill classes of all kinds, from community colleges to the most elite schools, eager to seize what they only glimpsed, did not understand fully, or missed entirely as 19 year olds. The Teaching Company, founded in 1990, now offers more than 250 courses, most of them in the humanities and most of them taught by professors prominent in their disciplines. Millions of people seek out the humanities in whatever form they appear, from classrooms and museums to television, radio, and the Web.

That said, no matter how popular some aspects of the humanities may become, the humanities require dedication and focus, and so they require colleges and universities and classrooms. Scholarship, like other kinds of research, requires specialization, sometimes in topics that can seem trivial to those outside the tradition. That expert knowledge is hard to gain, and so many of our Ph.D. students take almost a decade to master the languages and techniques that permit them to write their studies. People admire this kind of special knowledge in science and medicine but seem to think it somehow inappropriate for the humanities.

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It is not; it is essential. That specialization is not at odds with aggressive democratization. We have to know what we’re talking about before we start talking or we are of no real use.

The humanities are more useful than they claim. We are too deferential about the utility of what we do. Writing a novel, painting a painting, or performing a musical work can be, of course, important contributions; making sense of many novels, finding visual patterns in an entire era, or spreading word of neglected music are also worthy. A great teacher of English changes lives in ways both subtle and profound, year in and year out, long after the vast majority of novels have passed brief seasons of popularity.

Appreciating one kind of understanding does not mean we need to denigrate others. Business, medicine, science, and law reach out to the humanities; we should do the same. New programs in medical humanities; in science, technology, and the humanities; in the ethics of business; and in law and the humanities generally come from our colleagues in the professional schools who realize what the humanities have to offer. They would be happy to hear from us, with our own ideas of how to illuminate their important work, but many of us are too diffident, too unassuming or self-absorbed.

We have things to offer. The humanities bring profoundly useful gifts of broadened vision. They prepare people to see the largest contexts and consequences of things, to make subtle distinctions and create new experiences, to deal with ambiguity, novelty, and complexity. But young people who come from backgrounds that do not give

them reason to believe that they will have the opportunity to exercise those skills often avoid, and even resent, the humanities and the time and energy they consume. We have allowed the humanities to become perceived as prerequisites, obstacles to real study, delaying tactics while practical courses await.

The more exclusive and expensive the college or university, by and large, the more established the relative position of the humanities. Faculty and administrative leaders in those universities are often chosen from the ranks of the humanities; legendary teachers and scholars in those fields are among the most respected and beloved in the entire institution. At those schools,

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students choose to major in the humanities with enthusiasm and confidence. The most favored students in this country understand the value of the humanities because they see their value demonstrated with each graduating class, as people go off to every kind of career or professional school, all of which seem to show little regard for major. To be a classics graduate of an elite school is to see many opportunities ahead; but to be a classics major at a college or university where New York firms do not recruit or where graduate schools are wary is to take a large gamble – one that many students, whatever their interests, do not feel they can take.

One can hardly blame them. It should not be surprising that African American students, finally given a chance at college, major in business far more often than in the

humanities. For first-generation, immigrant, or working-class students, pre-vocational or vocational majors make more immediate sense, even though such majors often limit long-term flexibility and opportunity.

The unappreciated crisis of the humanities lies here. The humanities may not be reaching those who would find them most useful, who would find the greatest difference in their lives as a result of seeing with the magnification and broadening the humanities offer. The humanities and the faculty who teach them struggle at schools where students, and the institution itself, do not have confidence in the value of the humanities. If these trends continue, the humanities may become the exclusive property of those with especially large amounts of personal, cultural, or institutional capital, an apparent luxury good that proves to be intrinsically valuable.

The current crisis is exactly the wrong time for us to give up on the humanities or the uniquely American faith in a broad education that prepares us for the unexpected and unintended. The humanities are not in crisis among our best schools and our most privileged students, or adult students who return to college to enrich their lives. The crisis does not lie in scholarly fashions or canon wars or atrophied scholarship. Rather, the crisis lies in opportunities unfulfilled, in groups the humanities are not reaching.

Two separate crises intersect in our least favored schools. Students who struggle to finish high school or to attend community colleges or open-access publics or depleted private or parochial colleges need the perspective, encouragement, and wisdom the humanities have to offer. But it is the teachers in those very schools who are most beleaguered, most overworked, most likely to be adjuncts teaching at several jobs at once. Investing in the humanities in those schools would pay the biggest dividends, making it possible for our dedicated young Ph.D.s to make a decent living by teaching there. And in doing so those humanists would bring

the humanities to the people whose lives would be most changed by having the worlds of literature, history, art, music, philosophy, and language opened to them.

Precisely because the humanities prepare people to lead expansive and thoughtful lives, we must find ways to connect with people of all kinds, of all backgrounds and ages and aspirations, in all kinds of media and all kinds of contexts. The classroom and the library are worthy, and so are the museum, the television, the radio, and the website. The Ivy League is crucial, but so are all the other kinds of colleges. The humanities, wherever they live, cannot afford to be either cautious or elitist. They must put themselves forward in a world that needs what the humanities have to offer.

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