

# Editors' Introduction

The Bottom Line

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It seems that everywhere one looks these days, the debate over the “crisis in the humanities” is raging unabated. The profession, as all our readers have undoubtedly noticed, is in a full-on identity crisis: Who are we as a discipline? What is our work? Who do we serve? What values undergird our practice? These perennial questions and others are more insistent than ever, especially as they intersect with the economic issues that dominate higher education today.

For example, in a twist on recent discussions of the cost of higher education, Bill Sams (2010), Executive in Residence at Ohio University, wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that college students need to behave *more* like customers. For Sams, the focus is on the “failed service” of the teacher (a.k.a. the “service provider”) and the implied lunacy of students (a.k.a. the “customers”) to put up with such “failure.” Accordingly, he argues:

A student is a person *to* whom something is done (the student is taught); a customer is a person *for* whom something is done (a customer is provided a learning experience). Students take it as a given that they are acted upon and controlled by professors, who in turn will judge them on their performance. Students never question the fact that they pay the same for an F as an A. Customers, on the other hand, would find it incredible if a service provider charged the same amount for a failed service as for a top-level service — to say nothing of expecting to be paid a second time to overcome the original failure.

Thus, concludes Sams, it is not the students who have failed to perform in a class but the teacher, and it is only when students adapt a “productivity-based customer perspective” that new ideas and more effective teaching methods can be developed. Perhaps Sams would like to meet the disgruntled student who recently came to see Marcy (as chair of the English department) to complain that his professor had refused to speak to him right after a class in which the instructor had handed back graded papers; the instructor asked that students wait a day to read through comments and formulate responses before seeking a conference about their grades. This student found the “cooling off period” inconvenient and asserted, “Hey, I paid for those office hours.” Is that the kind of customer Sams longs for?<sup>1</sup>

Many have responded to Sams’s letter on the *Chronicle’s* blog, some surmising that perhaps Sams has written a well-crafted satire, but we are not so sure. Like Michael J. Armstrong (2010), we think that unless he is being facetious, Sams’s definition of students/customers is way off base. Armstrong writes: “A good student is not someone to whom something is done (teaching), but rather someone who does something for [him- or herself] (learning). Some of our students do adopt the former attitude, and approach their classes as if they can be passive recipients of knowledge transfer. But in doing so, they are behaving too much like customers, not too little like them.” In addition, casting the teacher as “service provider” misses the mark. For Armstrong, this analogy works only if we imagine the service provided as a professional service, along the lines of services provided by accountants, lawyers, and engineers, not retailers. In his argument, “the professionals exercise their expert judgment in deciding what services the client needs and how to provide them, and then the client is responsible for implementing the advice.”

One thing that Sams’s consumer model of higher education highlights is an increasingly popular definition of “value”—that is, one measured in terms of student satisfaction. Richard E. Miller (2004: 375) characterizes this situation perfectly:

With the state backing out of the higher education business and tuition climbing as best it can to make up the difference, the time has passed when public institutions of higher education can afford to disregard the question of whether their graduates leave feeling they were well served during their years in the academy. . . . The new economy, in other words, has brought with it a significant change: it has made institutions of higher education suddenly much more dependent upon student satisfaction. The equation is seemingly straightforward: if our students leave our

institutions dissatisfied with the quality of the education they've received, they are unlikely to become future donors; and, if they don't become future donors, then both the range of students served and the learning opportunities provided by public universities will continue to contract. . . . These students and their parents, reasonably enough it seems to me, expect to get something in exchange for their many different investments, something besides, that is, lectures on the perils of vocationalism and airy statements about the transcendent rewards of the life of the mind.

This tension between practical value (the “something” parents and students pay for) and the “transcendent rewards” of a liberal education is evident in much of the writing on this subject: we humanists cannot seem to help ourselves. Even as we acknowledge the realities of the new economy, there is a considerably strong desire in our profession to keep the project of the humanities “above” the concerns for the bottom line—that is, to value the humanities differently. Recent op-ed pieces by David Brooks (2010), Stanley Fish (2010), and Laurie Fendrich (2010) make stabs at defending the value of the humanities even as they acknowledge their decline. Fendrich notes that “education, it seems, has turned into a forum for exercises in cost-benefit analysis. How much does it cost to educate a student? How efficient is this institution or program at educating a student? How can educating a student be done for less? Does education lead to a good job? If it doesn't, how can we change education so that it does?” Ultimately, her defense of the “generally useless humanities” is to say that they are indeed indefensible *if* the defense rests solely on tangible “value”: “No one can defend the humanities in such a way that satisfies the multiple and conflicting demands of teachers, students, parents, administrators, legislators, student-loan account managers and employers. The defense is really very simple, although as a policy statement, it will never fly. The humanities satisfy the human craving for meaning. Too bad human beings can't afford this.”<sup>2</sup>

With Fendrich, Robert N. Watson (2010) also argues that the value of the humanities cannot be found in a cost-benefit analysis and outlines benefits that might accrue to students: “We shouldn't have to make a balance-sheet argument for the humanities, either, at least not until the balance-sheet includes the value, to the student and to the state, of expanded powers of personal empathy and cross-cultural respect, improved communication through language and other symbolic systems, and increased ability to tolerate and interpret complexity, contemplate morality, appreciate the many forms of artistic beauty, and generate creative, independent thought.” Despite this

claim, however, Watson spends the majority of his commentary on exactly that—a balance-sheet argument about the real profits of the humanities.

But maybe there is nothing wrong with that. Watson argues convincingly that despite misunderstandings about university budgets, the humanities actually pay for themselves.<sup>3</sup> Due in large part to our labor model, which David Bartholomae and his respondents explore in admirable depth in this issue, English departments that are heavily invested in general education are among the largest producers of student credit hours, and thus revenue, in the university. Watson notes that at UCLA, the humanities “generate over \$59 million in student fees, while spending only \$53.5 million (unlike the physical sciences, which came up several million dollars short in that category). The entire teaching staff of Writing Programs, which is absolutely essential to UCLA’s educational mission, has been sent firing notices, even though the spreadsheet shows that program generating \$4.3-million dollars in fee revenue, at a cost of only \$2.4 million.”<sup>4</sup> Two things jump out in this quote: the acknowledgment that the university writing program is “absolutely essential to [the] educational mission” and that the entire teaching staff was fired despite the cost to the university’s mission. Clearly, we need to do a better job talking about the significance of our work: how we do it, why we do it, and what the value of it is, monetarily, educationally, and vocationally.

And whatever we do, our action must address some version of the “bottom line,” but with a twist. Our bottom line is this: how does our work serve students? How could our classrooms generate the kind of “student satisfaction” that justifies the humanities and produces future (monetary) support? How do the values we promote in our classrooms encourage students with the lifelong desire to pursue learning? To be curious and empathetic and mindful? Miller (2004: 376) claims this battle will be lost “if those of us in the teaching profession do not learn new ways of thinking through the paradoxical necessity we now face of having to generate both revenue and public support for preserving learning spaces that are not driven by concerns about the bottom line.”

If we want the richness of our discipline to be valued, we need to do a better and more public job of showing just what it’s worth.

## Notes

1. To extend the customer service metaphor, it might amuse you to learn that after a fairly long discussion about the responsibilities of students and teachers for learning in this intermediate writing course — and not seeing a clear ending point to the conversation — Marcy asked, “What do you hope will happen next?” The student said, “Nothing. I just want to register my complaint.” If students are customers, are department chairs customer service representatives?
2. For more on the defense of the humanities in the face of their decline, see Cohen 2009, Brooks 2010, Fish 2010, Mulholland 2010, and Watson 2010.
3. Watson (2010) begins his commentary with a quote by University of California President Mark G. Yudof, who described the university budget crisis in the following way in a television interview: “Many of our, if I can put it this way, businesses are in good shape. We’re doing very well there. Our hospitals are full, our medical business, our medical research, the patient care. So, we have this core problem: Who is going to pay the salary of the English department? We have to have it. Who’s going to pay it in sociology, in the humanities? And that’s where we’re running into trouble.”
4. These data jibe with our experiences at large state institutions, such as Central Michigan University, where the 2008–9 university operating budget shows that the English department generates approximately \$14,300,000.00 in revenues with total expenditures budgeted at close to \$5,000,000.00. That means that contrary to the perception that the humanities are a drain on university resources, at CMU at least, the English department contributes roughly \$9.3 million back into the general fund. This calculation is based on fiscal year 2009 data; CMU now uses a responsibility-centered management budget model in which all revenues and expenses are charged to academic cost centers and then those centers’ profits are “taxed” at differential rates. Of course, because the College of Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences is the largest money maker, it is taxed at the highest rate, roughly 62 percent.

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