

JOB PROSPECTS: VOCATIONAL FORMATION
AS HUMANE LEARNING

Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be *ever* in your favor.
—Effie Trinket

LIFE IN PANEM

Another year, another round of austerity measures for the humanities. While some institutions have boldly cut whole departments, eliminating disciplines as old as the university itself, most have adopted the trusty strategy of slow starvation punctuated by the annual hunger games in which departments send forth tributes to defend their “value propositions” and battle for resources. The games are rigged of course. To survive, you must choose from among the available WMDs (weapons of metric dominance): grant dollars, enrollment levels, employment stats for your graduates, and so on. The discursive battles that ensue are so familiar that we know the lines by heart.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1: A budget task force meeting

ADMINISTRATOR: “As you can see, times have changed and we are facing increasing fiscal pressures. In this new climate, it is more important than ever that each unit pull its own weight. That is why we are developing these new program evaluation metrics and have asked you to gather data on how your alumni are faring in the job market.”

HUMANITIES PROFESSOR: “But don’t you see how these metrics are biased toward technical and pre-professional programs! You are prioritizing vocational aims and devaluing liberal education. Isn’t college more than job preparation?!”

ADMINISTRATOR: “Yes, of course, but if we can’t demonstrate return on investment, students will take their tuition dollars elsewhere, and we will be having this debate down the street at the coffee shop since we will all be out of a job.”

This strategy of defending the humanities by pointing to the extra-vocational aims of higher education had a good run. Typically, all it took was a reminder that the university prepares not only workers but future citizens for our democratic society and administrators would turn the heat back on in the English Building and put down the furniture they were carrying out of Philosophy Hall. But they say you have to learn to accept yourself. By the day, the contemporary corporate multiversity grows increasingly comfortable with the idea that it exists to advance R&D, sponsor semipro athletics, and provide workforce vetting, training, and credentialing. And so the rhetorical force leaks out of this first strategy. Nowadays, when we confront administrators with the question of whether college is more than job preparation, they hardly flinch.

For this reason, many humanists now adopt a second strategy. Turning back to our script, we find,

ACT ONE, SCENE 2: A strategic planning session

HUMANITIES CENTER DIRECTOR: “. . . that concludes my presentation. As you can see, we have some exciting new initiatives and the humanities remain vital despite the recent budget cuts. But faculty attrition is taking a toll, and we ask you to make it a priority to reinvest in the humanities in the coming years.”

DIRECTOR OF STEM RESEARCH CENTER: “Forgive me for saying this, but it sounds like what you are mainly worried about is protecting your own jobs when you should be thinking about our students’ job prospects. You mentioned philosophy, art history, and medieval studies. Sounds like good job training . . . for a barista!”

HUMANITIES CENTER DIRECTOR: “That’s funny. I thought you all believed in evidence, not hearsay. So let’s look at the data and clear up this myth once and for all. In an AAC&U survey, employers said that what really matters is not the student’s major but broad skills that cut across majors.² And it is striking that what these employers found lacking in their new hires were precisely the skills you get from humanities courses:

- only 30% of employers found recent college graduates well prepared to make ethical judgments;
- only 28% felt fully comfortable with the communication skills of their new hires;

- only 26% were satisfied with their critical thinking skills;
- and fewer than one in five found their new hires well prepared to deal with people from different cultures.³

Meanwhile, data shows that any career earnings gap for humanities majors is insignificant compared to that between college grads and high school grads. Indeed, a recent Brookings study found that, while business majors outearn history majors in the first decade of their careers, this is reversed from year fifteen on.⁴

Here I have given the Humanities Center director the last word, along with plenty of room to make her case. An actual exchange of this sort would play out differently. For example, if the STEM director had seen these same statistics, he might retort that art history majors earn just sixty cents on the dollar compared to engineering majors across the course of their careers.⁵

Nonetheless, the Humanities Center director's basic point still stands: even if all we care about is our graduates' monetary return on investment, the humanities hold their own. Consider one final comparison: while architecture majors earn 13% more on average than philosophy majors across their careers, philosophy majors still double the earnings of those without a college degree.⁶ Even when we restrict our focus to college graduates, it turns out that institutional selectivity is a more important factor than choice of major (see table 4).

So, humanists have two main strategies for parrying arguments about return on investment: we can remind our doubters and defunders that a college education is more than a vocational education, or we can assert our parity in readying students for the job market. Before pointing out their flaws, we should acknowledge the not-so-minor virtue shared by these counterclaims: they are true. There are indeed important extra-vocational

Table 4

Average annual salary, ten years post-degree, by major and institution type⁶

Major	Highly Selective	Very Selective	Selective	Nonselective
Math, Computer Science, and Engineering	\$79,811	\$61,581	\$58,631	\$52,740
Humanities/Social Sciences	\$76,468	\$58,344	\$53,197	\$44,852

dimensions of higher education; and it is a myth that humanities majors fare poorly on the market. Nonetheless, neither strategy gets us very far. We are not going to win the metrics game, and no one cares much anymore when we walk away from the table muttering mantras about educating the whole person.

These strategies are not only weak but dangerous. The purist rejection of vocational aims taps into an idea well worth leaving behind: namely, that liberal education is an education for leisure, a finishing school for the aristocracy. There is a discursive gravity in this area so that one tends to slide from the noncontroversial claim that life is about more than work to the objectionable idea that work and workers are somehow unworthy. While the second strategy sheds this tweedy, aristocratic baggage, it gives too much away. Short-term victories in the metrics game come at the cost of reinforcing the bottom-line mentality. And sooner or later, the humanities will be killed off as “insufficiently responsive to market trends.”

Or maybe the humanities will persist, lumbering on in zombie form. Indeed, one group of scholars thinks that we have already entered a period of “living death in higher education.”⁸ It is a fantasy to think that the humanities can survive for long, with their integrity intact, in the university of the bottom line. As Megan Laverty explains:

We now know that how individuals, objects, or activities are described affects our understanding of them. We only need to consider how “managerial newspeak” has shaped professors’ and students’ experiences of the university. Academics naïvely believed that they could enlist managerial redescriptions—the language of productivity, content-delivery, service-providers, and customers—while remaining invulnerable to their corrosive effects. Any ironic distance that they might have enjoyed is lost now that students “shop” for university degrees that will yield the highest return on the tuition they invest, market surveys determine the closure or introduction of programs and courses, and students’ evaluations play a role in tenure and promotion decisions. Current students destined to become future scholars are likely to lack the words and concepts necessary to appreciate the full import of their education.⁹

For many activities, you need to have the right gear; for all activities you need to have the right concepts. You really shouldn’t attempt winter mountaineering without an icepick and crampons. But you can’t teach at all if you are not oriented toward learning. You might be lecturing and leading discussion, grading papers and holding office hours, but still not really

teaching. What you are doing might be better described as satisfying the customer, fulfilling a teaching load, or getting good evaluations. We could make a similar point from the student's perspective. A sophomore sits in a humanities classroom. They might be asking themselves philosophical questions, learning to think historically, or truly listening to a poem. Or they might be preparing for an exam, satisfying a Gen Ed requirement, or building a strong application for law school. Framing matters.

Philip Jackson identifies two different species of teaching, framed by rival conceptual traditions.¹⁰ In one, the teacher is seen as possessor of knowledge; in the other, the teacher is seen as exemplar, gadfly, and dialogue partner. In the one, the student is seen as receptacle-to-be-filled; in the other, as person-in-process. In one, teaching is seen as transmission of detachable knowledge and skills; in the other, as transformation of a whole person. As Jackson points out, while the idea of teaching as transformation has a longer history, the idea of teaching as transmission (what Jackson calls the "mimetic" outlook) has come to dominate over the last couple of centuries. While we still speak about the value of the humanities and indeed about transformative learning, Jackson (glossed by Laverty) warns that, "When attention is given to the transformative outcomes, they are described in a mimetic idiom, which effectively vitiates their intrinsic or formative (as opposed to merely informative) value."¹¹ What ensues is a kind of zombie liberal learning wherein only the husk of the humanities remains.

Talk about picking your poison: Shall we hold tight to our (wooly) principles as we head over to the unemployment office or gamely embrace this brave new spreadsheet? Somehow we must avoid both choices, but what other avenue do we have? That there is indeed another way becomes clear when we notice that these two strategies actually share a key assumption. While one stresses the bottom-line of job placement and the other points to humanistic values beyond the vocational, both accept the contemporary university's vertiginous reduction of vocational education to training and credentialing.¹² What would happen if we were to accept that vocation is central to college education while rejecting this reductive picture of vocational education?

To my mind, the answer is clear. Technical and careerist concerns would occupy a relatively minor place in a more capacious vision of vocational development. By my count, vocational enactment entails no fewer than six essential tasks:

1. Finding a worthy form of work to which you are suited.
2. (Acquiring technical proficiency in your chosen field.)
3. Cultivating the ethical understanding necessary to enact your vocation with integrity and public purpose.
4. (Determining how to land a position in your chosen field.)
5. Learning how to grow into and through your work.
6. Learning how to grow out of your work, if and when the time comes.

I have parenthesized tasks (2) and (4) since these are the bread and butter of the contemporary university. What I want to argue is that each of these four further tasks, while sorely neglected in undergraduate education, represents a necessary condition of full vocational enactment.¹³ Thus, as soon as we widen our view beyond training and credentialing, a surprising fact comes into focus: the contemporary university is not really vocationalized at all, only *jobbified*. Indeed, a truly vocationalized university would be a site to behold! And when we reject the reduction of vocational education, the humanities are freed from the deadly dilemma of limping along in the metrics race or flying against the wind. For, as I hope to show, each of these neglected tasks of vocational development involves humane learning.

To be clear, this is not simply a call to do more. What the intensely myopic focus of the jobbified university produces is not an incomplete vocational education but rather a vocational miseducation. It is as if someone, after promising to build you a boat, delivered a hull and a stenciled name plate, reassuring you that later you can always add options such as a sail, compass, rudder, or life preserver. Indeed, one can argue that all college really delivers is the stenciled name plate. In moments of candor, most will admit that it is not until after college, in one's actual apprenticeship to a practice, that one acquires the majority of needed knowledge and skills. This suggests that in fact the credentialing function alone dominates, that colleges are basically deluxe head-hunting firms repackaging the sorting performed by the schools and the SATs in an elaborate four-year prescreening.¹⁴ On this deeply cynical, but unfortunately more than plausible reading, what colleges provide is mainly exchange-value. They might offer some use-value, by weeding out some candidates and ranking the rest by GPA, but the most significant winnowing procedure has probably already occurred during the college admissions process. And recall the point above about the importance of institutional selectivity (see table 4). The best explanation for why the line

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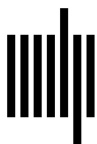
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