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The Humanities and What Matters

I want to thank Pat Johnson, the College's Alumni Chair in Humanities, for designing this afternoon's symposium and inviting me to participate in it. I am grateful, as well, to my colleagues in the College of Arts and Sciences, Jack Bauer (Roesch Chair; Psychology), Carissa Krane (Biology), Caroline Merithew (History), and Fred Niles (Visual Arts), for agreeing to join me on this panel. It is an honor, albeit a challenging one, to be with you to reflect upon the future of education and scholarship in the humanities in the 21st century. Of course, as is the case with any serious exploration of the humanities, we should not presume to know what the topic, "the future of the humanities," really means. It is hardly clear what the humanities are, and that is not a recent, 21st century phenomenon. The nature of the humanities themselves — that is, their character as academic traditions of education and scholarship, not merely as an organizational category in American colleges and universities — is always at stake in any wide-ranging discussion of the humanities. I hope to say something useful here about the distinctive character of the humanities. I also hope to say something useful that pertains specifically to our work and mission in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Dayton in our present moment.

Miss Porter's and Nussbaum's Defense of the Humanities

In 1997 Martha Nussbaum published *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Nussbaum 1997), drawing upon her expertise in classical Greek and Roman philosophy to offer an impassioned case for the value and relevance of liberal education in the face of American higher education's growing emphasis upon professionally-oriented, technically-defined skills. Having found that book to be helpful in my own thinking about liberal education at the time, I took the opportunity of Pat Johnson's

invitation to contribute to this symposium to read Nussbaum's latest work on higher education, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Nussbaum 2010). I happened to read the book while travelling to Connecticut for my niece's high school graduation from Miss Porter's School, an elite prep school for girls in Farmington, just a few blocks from my brother's home.¹ As I read Nussbaum's response to the grave challenges currently facing humanities education, I was taken by the ways in which my niece's education at Miss Porter's, however rarified and socioeconomically askew from the circumstances of most high school students in the United States, nevertheless embodied ideals and aims that continue to guide humanities education in most American universities. For it was evident to me, in conversing with my niece Jessica's classmates, their parents, and teachers that a Miss Porter's education genuinely celebrates liberal learning, with special attention to the cultivation of wonder, imagination, dialogic inquiry, historical sensibility, and care for language and creative expression that are fundamentally important to humanities education and scholarship. Miss Porter's students even are encouraged to challenge the very social stratification and privilege that make places such as Miss Porter's School such rare yet flourishing institutions.

Sarah Porter, who founded the school in 1843, herself pursued a life of serious scholarship, with special dedication to women's access to the very best education possible in her day. Porter had each of her women students design a plan of individualized learning that ranged beyond the traditional humanities to include the new sciences of the mid-nineteenth century, the fine and performing arts, and compulsory participation in athletics (as illustrated by the school's formation of a women's baseball team in 1867). Sarah Porter also inculcated in her students a strong ethic of service, which is evident to this day in the school's substantial involvement in service work, increasingly with a global emphasis.

¹ If you knew the tuition at Miss Porter's, you would infer readily, and correctly, that my brother does not work as a faculty member in a college of the liberal arts and sciences, although he did major in English as a college student.

The commencement at Miss Porter's School reflected in large measure the educational ideals that Nussbaum advances in *Not for Profit*. Nussbaum's endorsement of John Dewey's pronouncement that "each shall have the education which enables him [sic] to see within his daily work all there is in it of large and human significance . . ." (qtd. in Nussbaum 2010, 86) resonates well with Miss Porter's emphasis upon experientially engaged, practically applied, and civically spirited liberal learning. Yet I came away from the Miss Porter's commencement feeling that Nussbaum's defense of the humanities seems somewhat quaint. Notwithstanding Nussbaum's attention to the contemporary role of the humanities in developing students' capacities for critical thinking and for sympathetic imagination with others' predicaments, as well as Nussbaum's special emphasis upon the humanities' contribution to students' capabilities to approach problems as citizens of the world (2010, 7), her case for the humanities feels too narrow and increasingly limited in relevance in 2011. The extensive and wide-ranging engagements with literature, history, language, philosophy and religion, music, fine art, and global citizenship that Porter's students are able to have simply are not possible, in practical terms, given reasonable forecasts for funding of ordinary public and private school systems, given the prior academic preparation and cultural experience that most American students bring to high school or university, and given the intense pressures on most American households to sustain themselves economically and to prepare their children to find fairly compensated work. While Nussbaum plainly is aware of the ways in which the social and economic circumstances of our times challenge the aspirations of humanities education, the case she offers for the humanities seems better suited to the financial and social resources of Miss Porter's School — where the families of members of the graduating class appeared not to have the slightest concern about what their daughters would do following their next four years at Princeton or Stanford or Williams or Bowdoin — than to the rest of the country.

It is not so much that I object to Nussbaum's renewed call for the importance of critical thinking, global citizenship, and sympathetic imagination, as these capacities are

shaped and cultivated through the humanities, as that I feel that the humanities need more to say. Perhaps the humanities also need *more to be* in order to have more to say in our time. Nussbaum's *apologia* for humanities education has been in service since the days of Sarah Porter herself; yet the defense she offers for the humanities is taken less and less seriously in our own time, even by persons who themselves are beneficiaries of such education. As Stanley Fish comments in a recent column in the wake of the State University of New York at Albany's announcement that it would eliminate its academic programs in classics, French, Italian, Russian, and theatre, the pieties that guide familiar justifications for the humanities "have a 19th century air about them and are not even believed in by some who rehearse them" (Fish 2010).

Confronting the Rhetoric of Crisis

Nussbaum frames her book with the observation that the humanities occupy center stage in a "worldwide crisis in education" (2010, 2). In advancing the contention of crisis, she has much good company. Rarely a month goes by that a major higher education periodical or report from a professional association does not sound the alarm about the plight of the humanities. For example, Frank Donoghue, an English professor at Ohio State, goes so far as to claim that, while the humanities will survive the 21st century, they won't survive as an integral part of four-year universities and their curricula (Donoghue 2010; cf. Donoghue 2008). According to Donoghue, the humanities' central place in the university curriculum has been on the decline for the past two generations. Given the increasing movement of students away from B.A. degrees and the concomitant increase in the production of professional academic degrees, along with universities' increasing financial dependence upon external research funding and corporate support, Donoghue believes that the question about the humanities' survival in the core university curriculum is "not really an intellectual question but a self-interested professional one, because we humanists would like to see ourselves as stewards of the curriculum" (6). One can feel the force of

Donoghue's point simply by considering the contrast between the frequency of public acknowledgements of the indispensability of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education and the paucity of such public campaigns to expand and increase funding for education in literature, history, languages, religion, and philosophy.

For those who have not yet encountered such descriptions of a crisis in humanities education, I would offer two sets of data. The first comes from the American Historical Association's meeting last month, at which it was reported that the number of faculty positions in history dropped by 29.4% in 2009-10, following a drop of 23.8% in 2008-09. The number of history positions available last year, 569, was the lowest in 25 years. Newer areas of history that one might think would draw increased interest from universities are suffering more than traditional fields: African history openings dropped 62% last year, and positions in Latin American history fell 43% (Jaschik 2011). Similarly dire numbers characterize the availability of faculty positions in other fields in the humanities. The Modern Language Association reported that faculty positions listed for English in 2008-09 had declined 24% over the previous year; positions in languages declined 27% (Modern Language Association Office of Research 2009). Such steep declines in faculty hiring reflect many universities' advancing divestment from humanities departments and programs, and will lead inevitably to declines in the numbers of students engaging in advanced historical, literary, or language study. The instance of the field of history may be especially instructive, as one would suppose that the general public has greater appreciation for the societal value of advanced education and scholarship in history than, say, for the study of philosophy or literature.

The second set of data concerns student interest in humanities degrees. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators project reports that in the twenty years from 1987 through 2007 between 10% and 12% of all bachelor's degrees awarded in the U.S. were in humanities fields. During the same period, between 26% and 30% of all bachelor's degrees were awarded in fields in the sciences, and between 20% and

25% of all degrees were awarded in business and management. Bachelor's degrees in the behavioral and social sciences also outstripped the humanities, ranging from 13% to 16% of all degrees.² Over the forty-one year period from 1966-2007, the National Science Foundation found that the percentage of bachelor's degrees offered in the humanities decreased from a high of 17.7% in 1967 to a near-low of 8.1% in 2007³, and that was before the grave financial crisis of 2008. At UD, the percentage of first-year students entering the University who seek B.A. degrees has declined noticeably during the past decade. Reaching in 2002 a high for the decade of 41% of the entering UD class, for the past two years only 28-29% of entering first-year students were planning to major in a B.A. program. Moreover, among B.A. students at UD, the percentage majoring in the humanities has also been on the decline. Full-time faculty positions in the humanities at UD actually have increased during the same period, primarily due to the University's efforts to reduce reliance on part-time faculty in the delivery of first-year general education courses.

Despite such worrisome data, I believe that we should resist the rhetoric of crisis, for I fear it will occasion hasty, ill-considered, and dangerous capitulations to short-sighted, tactically-motivated responses. In the long run, conceiving of the humanities as technical professions in disguise, or abandoning the claims for their value beyond the reach of core curriculum requirements, will undermine the guiding values of humanities education and scholarship and, in turn, fatally wound the character of liberal education at a Catholic university. Much as we in the humanities nudge or entice our students to become, in Augustine's words, questions for themselves, we in the humanities should adhere to our own advice. Humanities educators should be willing to become questions for ourselves, in hope that deep self-examination will uncover new, well-grounded modes of commitment to humanistic projects, perhaps conceived in new ways. In short, humanities education should turn its own tools, methods, and practices upon itself. While I cannot carry out such a

² See Figure II-1b in the Appendix A.

³ See Figure II-1a in the Appendix B.

project fully in the limited time remaining today, I want to indicate one way in which such a project could proceed. It should begin, I suggest, by clarifying what the humanities are. This should illuminate why the humanities matter in our time. Such illumination, in turn, should disclose some new ways in which humanities education and scholarship can gain greater relevance and support, even in a financially fraught, culturally skeptical environment, while retaining continuity with the rich intellectual and artistic traditions that have bestowed humanistic learning to us. I shall take only a few steps in this direction this afternoon.

What Matters to Us, and What Matters to Us about the Humanities

I entitled these remarks, "The Humanities and What Matters," because one of the distinctive, enduring qualities that characterizes study in the humanities is that such study addresses what matters in human lives. Of course, all academic disciplines concern themselves in some way or other with what matters in some sense or other. But fields outside the humanities, and especially those that profess to be sciences, study what matters *about us* and our place in social or natural worlds. The social and natural sciences are concerned with what matters in that they seek to understand and explain the worlds we inhabit and the kinds of organisms and social creatures we are. They seek to make sense of us, among the myriad of other natural and social objects, agents, processes, and systems they study, by examining the forces and relationships that influence the physical, biological, psychological, ecological, or social conditions of our lives and behaviors. But the sciences are not concerned fundamentally with what matters *to us*, with what we *care* about, except as what matters to us can be explained by other, empirical facts about us. In the humanities, by contrast, we take seriously, for their own sake, the perspectival concerns or subjective standpoints of human beings, what we find *meaningful*, what we find to be of

value, what has *significance* to us.⁴ The humanities are *disciplined forms of studying, or reading, human significance and valuation*. To use a metaphor that is overly simple and admittedly calls for more elucidation, the humanities take interest in human concern *from the inside*, whereas the sciences investigate human concern as data, solely *from the outside*.

The humanities are, therefore, natural allies of the fine and performing arts, in part because the latter eschew the pretension to be wholly scientific, and also because, as in the arts, the ways in which the humanities explore what we value express, at the same time, normative commitments, ideals, practices, and responsibilities that are themselves subjects of humanistic study and critical scrutiny. The humanities study what matters to human beings in such a manner that such study becomes implicated in the very subject. In the humanities, there is no escaping the valuational, the self-reflexively interpretive. This, I suggest, is perhaps the most important, identifying feature of humanities education and scholarship.

The self-reflexive, inescapably evaluative character of the humanities helps to explain why many of the academic fields in the humanities seem to lack stable, determinate, disciplinary subject matters.⁵ This feature of the humanities also helps to explain the serviceability of the humanities for interdisciplinary study, including study that collaborates closely with the social and natural sciences. It explains, as well, what commonly bothers those outside the humanities most about such study, namely, that it risks being too personally engaged with normative commitments to be genuinely objective, knowledge-seeking, and professionally legitimate.

⁴ See Davidson and Goldberg 2004 for related discussion about the character of the humanities.

⁵ I would argue that even disciplines such as communication, history, religious studies, and languages that maintain close ties to the social sciences retain this elusive, seemingly subject-less quality at their core. They are also meaning-seeking areas of study, aiming to construct conceptions, theoretical models, and explanations that make sense to and for us, not merely sense of and about us.

This manner of characterizing the humanities, as the disciplined, self-reflexive study of what matters to us as human beings, has the advantage that it provides a way to explain the singular depth of the humanities. What matters to human beings emerges in the context of various traditions of speaking, writing, rhetoric, literature, religious practice, philosophical reflection, and historical understanding — embedded and inscribed in language — without which what we care about could not remain unchanged. The areas of study that comprise the humanities reflect features of human intellect, experience, culture, and history that, in part, constitute, frame, or infuse what we care about. The humanities are, therefore, in this additional respect internally connected to what matters to us and so are deeply human in this way.

If the humanities are tied deeply to what matters to us, then the practical intellectual, ethical, and civic value that Nussbaum finds in the humanities arises as a matter of course. Taking as their subject what is meaningful to human beings, the humanities are valuable for the education of our capabilities to make reasonable and wise practical judgments about what to do and how to live. Likewise, the humanities nurture dispositions for engaged and responsible community agency and citizenship. They enrich and refine our emotions and responsiveness to others' emotions, sensitizing us more powerfully and subtly to what we care about and to the lives of others.⁶

New Directions in Humanities Education and Scholarship

Characterizing the humanities along the lines I have sketched here invites us to take seriously new ways of pursuing and organizing study in the humanities. Human concern need not forever be organized to align with the departmental categories of Communication, English, History, Languages, Philosophy, and Religious Studies or with the traditional

⁶ The formation and refinement of our sympathetic and empathetic capacities is especially urgent in the light of the finding in a recent study by the University of Michigan that college students today are roughly 40% less empathetic than college students were two or three decades ago (University of Michigan 2010).

disciplinary divisions reflected in contemporary professional academic associations, such as the American Academy of Religion, the American Historical Association, the Modern Language Association, the National Communication Association, and so on. First, the humanities disciplines can learn and borrow from one another and from other fields in order to clarify and highlight critical areas of academic exploration and to refigure their institutional presence. It is not unimportant that such moves can aid in attracting the interest of new generations of students and scholars. An instructive example of such programmatic development can be found in our own Department of Religious Studies' design a decade ago of its doctoral program in theology as an historically- and culturally-sited program, one that devotes particular attention to the experience of Catholics in America through multiple disciplinary perspectives. The sharpening of the program's academic focus and the accompanying expansion of its cross-disciplinary reach respond to patterns of theological concern that are not naturally addressed in traditional doctoral programs in theology. In part for this reason, the program has attracted very talented faculty members and graduate students.

Such a pattern of focused programmatic contextualization and expanded interdisciplinary scope has served well a variety of programs at UD, from Women's and Gender Studies to Human Rights Studies. This type of approach could point the way toward new scholarly and curricular initiatives in many areas of the humanities. Even at the level of re-imagined faculty position descriptions in academic departments, as in the English Department's current faculty search for an expert in rhetoric and composition who specializes in new media and digital literacies, much can be accomplished through reconceived faculty lines to address unacknowledged or underexamined areas of student interest and research. New or hitherto neglected domains of human concern legitimately may call for new programmatic emphases and institutional structures in the humanities; such changes should not necessarily be viewed merely as exercises in academic branding designed to win new academic customers.

Second, the humanities could well become more collaborative and communal in their approaches to pedagogical design, curricular systems, and the organization of scholarly projects. For centuries, the humanistic enterprise has been typified by relatively isolated individuals struggling through close readings of individually selected textual materials to yield individually conceived and constructed interpretations or theoretical conceptions which then are instantiated as discrete, self-contained texts. The relative solitude of most research in the humanities is probably something that attracts certain types of personality to these fields. However, the forms that texts now may take and the ways in which they can be composed, transmitted, dissected, reassembled, and referenced make it possible for the humanities to engage in larger scale, collaboratively executed projects of the kind that typify much scientific study. Even modest changes in forums for scholarly and student interchange, as in blogs, wikis, and on-line symposia, hold much promise for eliciting new interest in the humanities. In practice, the humanities have always had communal, dialogic dimensions, but this aspect of the humanities has been so far removed from view, especially the view of students, that much more could be done to engender new communities of discourse, reading, and interpretation in the humanities.

It is my hope that the Humanities Commons, established last fall in an effort to highlight the shared learning and communal work required for design and implementation of the first year humanities components of the Common Academic Program, will become on our campus an exemplification of this more fully collaborative, public, and inviting face of humanities education.

Third, I anticipate that the humanities will continue to become more empirically informed and sensitive to data even as they sustain the approaches to human meaning, value, and significance that distinguish them from the sciences.⁷ The humanities' engagement with the evidence and methods deployed in the sciences has been

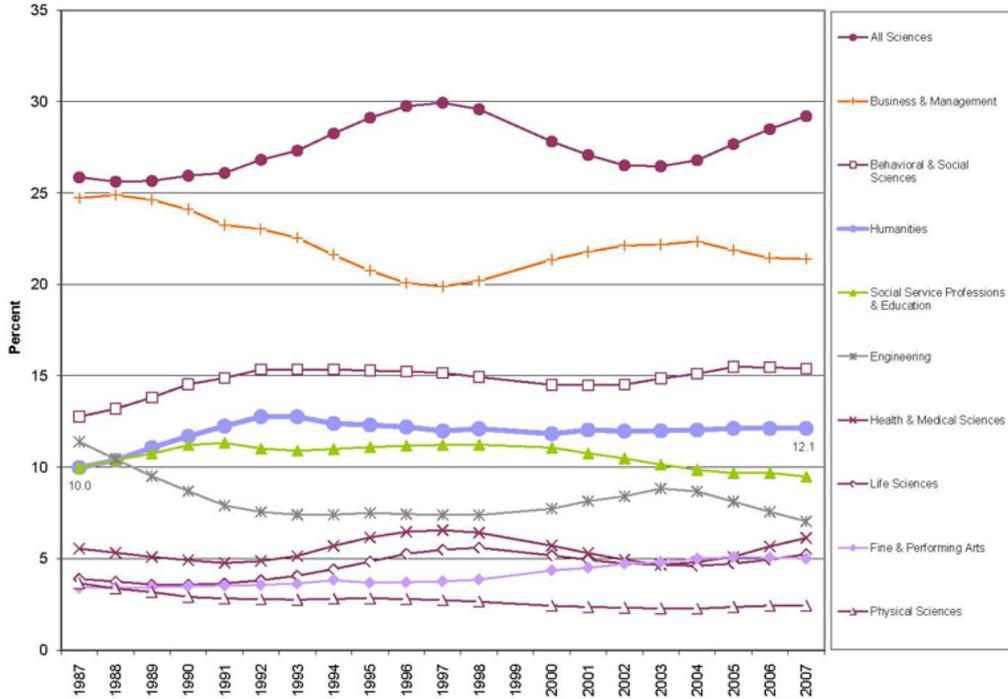
⁷ Cf. William Germano's remark that, in parallel with C. P. Snow's account of the tensions between the scientific and the humanistic cultures, "the two cultures of the contemporary world are the culture of data and the culture of narrative" (Germano 2010).

longstanding, but it has accelerated dramatically in the last thirty years, even in the wake of the collapse of positivism. Literature's involvement with ecology and landscape, philosophy's involvement with the cognitive and neurosciences, and the widespread use of digital databases in history are now familiar examples of surging interfaces between the humanities and the empirical sciences. While I am not yet prepared to endorse the emergence of "culturomics" (Cohen 2010), there is much fascinating study to be spurred in the digital humanities. Opportunities abound to strengthen the humanities' interpretive arguments and conceptual models by utilizing new technological means to link words to material culture and to map broad patterns in human language and evaluative practice. There is some risk that wholesale embrace of digitized data and its analysis could threaten the distinctive characteristics of study in the humanities. But the dissolution of the integrity of the humanities is by no means inevitable simply because we now identify ways to organize, analyze, and share the ways we read and interpret what matters to us as human beings.

If the humanities are disciplined, self-reflexive ways of reading what matters to us as human beings, and if what human beings value is informed, mediated, and transmitted in part through robust webs of tradition, then liberating the humanities from programmatic insularity, methodological entrenchment, and intellectual isolation need not entail abandoning the rich resources of those traditions that empower us to discern, engender, and renew meaning in human life. The humanities can remain deep reservoirs of cultural inheritance, practical wisdom, and beauty even as they point the way to new modes of uncovering, expressing, and enacting what matters deeply to us. Yet, I fear, without new ways of cultivating our humanity through academic study of what matters, both the traditions that the humanities sustain and the powerful, self-critical, liberatory potential they embody may be damaged irreparably. If humanists collectively fail to respond to this challenge constructively and with self-critical imagination, then the crisis for the humanities in our still-young century will be of our own making.

Appendix A.

Figure II-1b: Shares of All Bachelor's Degrees Awarded in Selected Academic Fields, 1987-2007



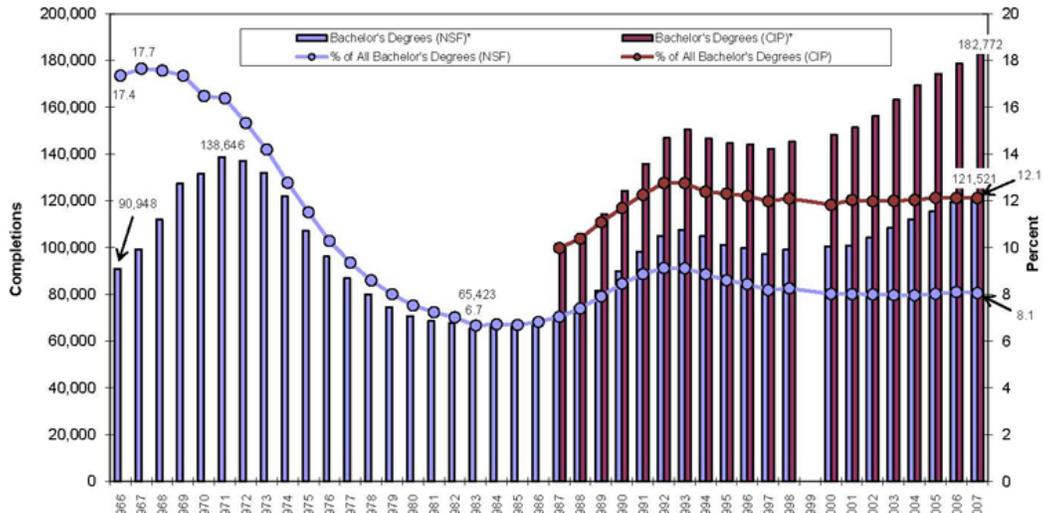
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Data System, accessed via the National Science Foundation's online integrated science and engineering resources data system, WebCASPAR.

Humanities Indicators, 2009 · American Academy of Arts & Sciences

(American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2009, Humanities Indicators II-1)

Appendix B.

Figure II-1a: Bachelor's Degree Completions in the Humanities (Absolute Number and as a Percentage of All Bachelor's Degree Completions), 1966–2007



* Please see "Note on the Data Used to Construct Degree-Related Indicators" for an explanation of the differences between the two trend lines.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Data System, accessed via the National Science Foundation's online integrated science and engineering resources data system, Web-CASPAR.

Humanities Indicators, 2009 · American Academy of Arts & Sciences

(American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2009, Humanities Indicators II-1)

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