



## **The Humanities and the Education Pie**

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The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Humanities Symposium, “Humanities Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”  
Sears Auditorium  
February 15, 2011

- Good afternoon. First I want to thank Professor Johnson for the opportunity to talk about a topic that’s close to my heart.
- My approach today is to respond to and expand upon Dean Benson’s invigorating vision for the humanities by first addressing the notion of the humanities as a shrinking piece of the education pie, and then to offer some thoughts about whether we should view the humanities as a piece of pie at all.

### **Humanities: A Shrinking Piece of the Education Pie?**

- I can hardly represent the social sciences without presenting some data on a Powerpoint. These data come from the U.S. Department of Education and speak to the question of whether the humanities is in crisis.
- The following charts show the percentage of humanities bachelor degrees awarded over the past four decades.
- Let’s look some pie charts. For all these slides, the humanities = the humanities core + arts, but not history or communication. (History in these data fall in the social sciences, whereas communication falls in the “other” category.)
- [Second slide] Here’s 1970, which appears to be a high-water mark for the humanities.
- [Third slide] Here’s 1985, which represents a low point for the humanities. But we see it’s not just the humanities that takes a hit. We see decreases across the arts, sciences, and education as well. We see substantial increases in business, computer science, and “other,” which include communication and health professions.
- [Fourth slide] By 2007, we see some rebound in the humanities and other liberal arts.
- Overall, these data somewhat temper the figures raised in Dean Benson’s talk. But they also provide an empirical rationale to heed his call to resist the rhetoric of crisis, at least where student interest is concerned.
- But even if from other perspectives (like faculty hires) we do think that the humanities is in decline, we must face another important question: *Is this a bad thing?*
- On the face of it, these declines seem bad of course for the *humanities*, but are they bad for *humanity*?
- *Should* more college students get degrees in the humanities? Would the country, or humanity, be better off with more humanities majors and fewer other majors?

- Should universities, without changing the content of the courses we offer, simply try to convince more students to major in the humanities? Maybe we run an ad campaign: “The humanities makes you smarter!”
- What IS the optimal percentage of humanities degrees, anyway? 90%? 100?
- Regardless of the answer to these questions, I have no doubt that the humanities is essential for economic development, for society’s health, for national and world politics, and for our national character and humanity’s well-being.
- [Click ppt] But I’m not convinced that granting more humanities degrees is *necessarily* the path to take.
- In other words, perhaps we should *not* focus so much on the size of the humanities’ piece of the education pie, or even on pieces of pie at all [Click ppt]. Perhaps where the humanities can help society the most is not as a piece separate from all the other pieces, but as a key element of those other pieces.
- If so, I suggest we start thinking about the humanities as the pie’s crust. [Click ppt]

### **The Humanities as the Crust, Not a Piece, of Education Pie**

- Now, I had considered saying that we should think of the humanities as the pie’s *filling*. But the crust gives shape and structure to the filling, makes the filling comprehensible *as pie*.
- But to be sure the crust metaphor worked, I asked my wife, “Trish, what do you think of...pie crust?” Now, between our two kids and me, she’s used to out-of-the-blue questions like this. Without a pause, she said, “Well, the crust makes or breaks a pie.” Beautiful. Without a cultivated capacity for critical reasoning, education doesn’t work.
- Then again, pie crust might connote “crusty,” as in a crotchety contrarian or curmudgeon. Well, that’s just fine, because one of the great gifts of the humanities is that it teaches us not to accept every lame idea that comes down the pike.
- Dean Benson characterized the typical arguments for the humanities—such as “it teaches critical thinking”—as quaint and perhaps elitist. I think that’s right on. When I read Martha Nussbaum or someone like Susan Jacoby, I get a shot of exhilaration followed by a sense that it’s so much preaching to the choir. A quaint and elite choir. A choir I love, but still...
  - But this is like pie crust too: Few things connote quaint Americana like an flaky-crust ed apple pie, pure and simple. The typical humanities argument is quaint because it’s too simple. Life is complex, and a living in a complex society demands more than training in just complex thinking in the abstract. It needs, or at least seems to be asking for, training to think complexly *about* something *concrete* (that is, a specific *kind* of pie filling).
- As for “elite,” pie crust also connotes “upper crust.” The humanities may by its nature be an elite pursuit because it’s not concrete, it’s detached, it’s not tethered to any specific line of work outside the academy. This understanding is at least as old as Aristotle, who said the good life, defined largely as the examined life, was dependent in no small part on leisure.
- Okay, last one: Pie crust can also be flaky. Okay, fine. From the perspective of many other disciplines, the humanities *is* kind of flaky, or frivolous. If, in arguing with a business major over the importance of the humanities, you say, “But the humanities teaches critical reasoning and examines the depth and breadth of human meaning and value,” I dare say that your adversary hears something along the lines of “blah, blah, blah.”
- Here I think that part of the humanities’ problem is a public relations problem, a problem of spin. If we adopt the humanities’ “crusty” nature and say to the business major that the humanities can teach you how not to be a sucker, a drone, a zombie; that the humanities teaches you a million ways how to think apart from the herd, to be an individual, to be innovative, creative, and crisp. Perhaps the right spin can turn “blah, blah, blah” into “I wanna get me a piece of that pie.”

- But the real problems are more substantial. And the humanities as the crust of the pie can help address them. The key, I think, is transdisciplinarity.
  - Dean Benson mapped an interdisciplinary territory for the humanities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
  - I agree with this and wish to emphasize the transdisciplinary dimension of his comments by saying that the humanities should not only become “more collaborative and communal” with other disciplines but also *interpenetrate* other fields, directly support them, flavor them with the humanities sensibility, and be flavored in return.
    - {• Transdisciplinarity, as characterized by Basarab Nicolescu of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, involves not only joining different disciplines around a common interest but also doing so in a way that transforms the individual disciplines themselves, with new fields and methods of inquiry emerging.}
- Transdisciplinarity stands in opposition to the notion of the humanities as an elite ruling authority over academia. It stands in opposition to the notion that scholarly disciplines are best thought of as separable pieces of pie.
  - Let me ask: How confident are you that students who are non-humanities majors are able to apply what they learn from Philosophy 101 or History 101 to their courses in business or education or psychology?
    - From a curriculum perspective, we leave the cross-fertilization between the humanities and other fields up to the individual student.
- But we don’t have to. If we viewed the humanities as pie crust, working in tandem with the various pie fillings of other majors, we might see required, major-specific courses in the humanities, such as courses we already have here at UD like business ethics, history of psychology, or the numerous courses on “religion and…” and “women and…”
- More difficult to accomplish in the crustification of the humanities would be the infusion of the humanities into existing courses.
  - Few non-humanities faculty members could possibly do the humanities justice in their specialty fields, so team-teaching would probably be necessary.
  - Courses might have to be extended to pour in the major’s pie filling while also crust-examining (yikes) the history of the particular filling, its epistemological assumptions, the role of religious ideals and institutions in producing the filling, and so on.
    - It’s an administrative nightmare at first, but how else could a transdisciplinary education work?
  - Also, such a curriculum surely depends on the tenure system. {It takes job security, and the experience that precedes it, to develop a working knowledge of another discipline or to skillfully coordinate a course taught by an interdisciplinary team.}
- An exemplar of this idea is the philosopher Owen Flanagan and his work on what he calls “eudaimonics,” which is a transdisciplinary study emerging from the integration of philosophy, psychology, religion, and neuroscience on the topic of meaning and human flourishing.
  - He’ll come to speak at UD next fall, and I encourage you to take part!

### **The Humanities as Homemade, Not Store-Bought, Crust**

- Now, why is transdisciplinarity so important for education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and why does the humanities play such a key role?
  - Well, transdisciplinarity is especially well suited for making sense of complexity. And if there’s one characteristic of modern life that suggests the problems and potentials of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I’d say it’s *complexity*.
  - More people today have more options in their lives than ever before. We’re more educated, more multicultural, and have access to more information. Googles of it.

- But information is not knowledge, plus all these options breed anxiety. With so much exposure to alternatives in life, self-identity becomes a problem: Now that I have seen the validity of so many points of view, where do I stand? What should I believe? What should I do? With whom do I identify? Who am I?
- {{CUT FROM TALK: • The humanities captured this development last century in such forms as existentialism and postmodernism. The key problems were and will continue to involve questions of self-identity.
- In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the questions “What is a person?” and “What does it mean to be human?” and “What is natural?” also permeate society.
  - Already we have been facing decisions of what constitutes life, and human life in particular. I won’t go down that path right now.
  - But let’s consider the “enhanced human,” on which we might consider a sliding scale of difficulty for defining personhood. Start with organ transplants: Few question their human value. Cosmetic surgery to enhance appearance? That’s more of a frivolous ethical concern for many folks.
    - But drugs like steroids to improve physical prowess are more contentious. What if they were safe? Then there is the rapidly advancing progress in prosthetics. What if they were used like voluntary cosmetic surgery, simply to improve strength or speed?
    - What of genetic modification and selection for desirable characteristics of body or personality? What of using drugs like Ritalin to improve cognitive skills simply for taking tests? If all these things were safe, should we all do them?
    - How is the availability of these options for “enhancement” from life’s lottery for being born into physical or intellectual or social or monetary resources, with which one can gain further access to education, healthcare, or nurturing environments?
  - At the heart of these questions is what we think “natural” means, what a human is, what a person is. Should our existing assumptions carry they weight they do?
    - One more, on the notion of knowledge and personhood: What about artificial intelligence is artificial? What about as AI becomes more intuitive? Does that diminish the worth of humans? It’s easy to answer no, but more difficult to say why, in part because we currently define so much of our worth in terms of our being generators and consumers of information.
      - A slight shift to defining ourselves as generators of knowledge, not information, would immediately add to our worth, but eventually I have to imagine that that worth will dry up. Surely we’re worth more than the knowledge we generate, but what? Love, maybe.
  - In any case we need a way to make sense of these questions.}}
  - As philosophers Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur have emphasized—and really as fields across the humanities and more recently the social sciences have acknowledged—we make sense of all this complexity in stories, by constructing narratives.
    - As the interdisciplinary psychologist Dan McAdams, who by the way will be speaking here in April, put it, our lives have facts, but our life stories give the facts meaning, the very meaning of our lives. Or as Joan Didion put it, “we tell ourselves stories in order to live.”
  - Fields like literature, history, religious studies, and philosophy are *specialists* in narrative meaning-making.
    - But it’s not just that the humanities *provides* us with stories to *adopt* as working models for life. It’s that the humanities helps scaffold our *abilities* to *construct* more comprehensive and examined stories.
  - From this perspective, the difference between an unexamined life and an examined life is a matter of how much we are the authors of our own story. Do we simply adopt whatever

narratives that are given to us? Or do we question those stories and the ideals and actions within them, in an effort to construct a life story that both connects us to others and is our own unique identity?

- Importantly for today, how do we structure the education system—or, bake our education pie—to bring out the full flavor the examined life?
  - Well, when it comes to education pie, a humanities crust is a *homemade* crust.
  - It's a lot easier to buy a store-bought crust, but often less satisfying. We do this every time we're told a story about how life works but fail to examine the story's ideals, its source, its structure, its alternatives. With each store-bought crust we consume, we move that much closer to having the contours of our lives shaped wholesale by forces that can scarcely consider the vicissitudes of our individual life—our own senses and sensibilities, our own unique life context.
    - The artifice of the store-bought pie is perhaps most palpable in contrast to what's missing—you have a pie, but not the sweet smell that fills your home and life when you actually bake the pie yourself.
  - Alternatively, we can make our own crust. But this takes more time, and it takes skill—the kind of skill we learn from the humanities. To make this crust, we might use the luscious lard of literature, or we might want the philosophical, flaky crust, or we might use the sweet butter of religion.
    - But with a humanities crust baked in conjunction with a favorite filling, I think a transdisciplinary curriculum can help its students bake a rich pie of their own design and personal taste.
- We face an uncertain future, where the questions of identity and personhood will only become more complicated. Whom do *you* want to help us sort it all out and provide a coherent, compassionate, engaging narrative? Engineers? Lawyers? Corporate executives?
  - I hope so, because in fact they and all the rest of us will be sorting it out together, as we always have, as best we can. But the question is whether we all have the human-inquiry skills to sort it out humanely—to bake a pie that nourishes every last one of us.