

The Teaching of the Arts and  
Humanities at Harvard College:  
Mapping the Future

# The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College

## Mapping the Future

### Introduction

The Arts and Humanities teach us how to describe experience, how to evaluate it, and how to imagine its liberating transformation.

Many of the adjectives we find indispensable for *description* of experience are drawn from the formal terms of imaginative art and philosophy. A very short sample of a very long list would include “tragic,” “comic,” “elegiac,” “satiric,” “sublime,” “stoic,” “Platonic,” and “harmonious.” A culture of the Humanities enables us, that is, satisfyingly to describe, and thereby give precise voice to, sets, and subsets, of our most vital emotional and cognitive experience. All of us, whether we know it or not, have habitual recourse to the language of art criticism and philosophy because art and philosophy are “where the meanings are” (or at least a good deal of them!); the terms of art and philosophy are the irreplaceable, companionable forms to our articulate reception of the world, without which we fall painfully mute.

The capacity precisely to describe experience of the world also, however, provokes *evaluation* of the world, through the act of deliberative criticism. The very word “criticism,” deriving from Greek “*krites*,” meaning “judge,” signals the profound connections between descriptive reception and reparative evaluation of the world: our rigorous, receptive responsiveness to art and philosophy provokes, that is, an answering responsibility to the world. We are emboldened, not to say impelled, by

the voice we derive from experience of the immense Humanities archive to answer, as critics, not merely to the work of art but to the world at large. We do so through the application of practical judgment.

As we answer, so too do we seek to harness art's capacity constructively to imagine *transformation* of the world. Just as the engineer makes life-transforming models through drawing on her *ingenium*, or imagination, so too the artist, and those emboldened to evaluation through responsiveness to art, imagine the remaking of an always recalcitrant world. Every work of art is an act of recreative *poesis*, or making, and thereby models the liberating way in which the world itself might be remade.

Of course different teachers of the Humanities will give priority to differing elements in this nexus of practices. This document, indeed, will articulate distinguishable traditions of Humanities scholarship more precisely below. We start, however, simply by underscoring the activity of humanists as variously receptive, critical and constructive. This is a deeply satisfying, passionate pedagogic enterprise (for both teachers and students), whose dynamism derives from the relation between the private study, the communal classroom and the world beyond.

The need to underscore this nexus of illuminating reception and constructive evaluation by the Arts and the Humanities is all the more urgent given the historical moment we face, a moment characterized by economic, military, ecological, religious and technological challenges of mighty profile. We therefore judge re-articulation of the extraordinary promise of the Humanities to be timely. Our students are preparing to act adroitly in a global environment; they are also preparing to flourish in an austere job market. The Arts and the Humanities are essential on both inter-

related fronts, cultural and personal. This document offers such an articulation. We begin by focusing, however, on a prior and more immediate challenge, which is the troubled status of the Humanities themselves in this new environment.

The transmission to undergraduates of distinctive forms of thought in the Humanities is under pressure in both the United States and broadly analogous nations. Outright political realignment, diminution and neutralization of Humanities learning at university level would appear to characterize European more than American university systems, partly because there is no such thing as a national university system in the United States, and partly because there is profound institutional and social investment in the liberal arts in this country.<sup>1</sup> These shifts, both actual and foreseen, are nonetheless provoking alarm in the profession nationally.

We can articulate the obvious challenges that humanists face nationally and internationally. Skeptical commentators routinely pitch one or more of the following, more or less hostile arguments, about the environment for the Humanities, or segments thereof, in the West:<sup>2</sup>

- (i) *The Economic Argument.* The world order, both political and economic, established in the wake of Allied Victory in 1945 is palpably shifting. As it

---

<sup>1</sup> See Geoffrey Galt Harpham, [\*The Humanities and the Dream of America\*](#) (University of Chicago Press, 2011), Chapter 6 (especially pp. 148-151).

<sup>2</sup> Many of these arguments are handily collected, and answered, in Mark Turcato and Stéfan Sinclair's "[Confronting the Criticisms: A Survey of Attacks on the Humanities](#)" (*4Humanities*, 10/9/2012). See also James Grossman's blog post, "[The Value of the Humanities: A Roundtable of Links](#)" (*AHA Today*, 2/26/2013) for further articles and blog posts defending the value of the humanities.



shifts, the West needs to compete at every level. Academic study of the Humanities was a fine accoutrement of the civilizing mission of a victorious imperial power throughout the last half of the twentieth century, but balances of world power impose new exigencies. We must educate young people to compete in a global environment. Knowledge of the Humanities is no practical response to most pressing practical challenges we face. University education must be aligned with national need, both strategic and economic.<sup>3</sup>

- (ii) *The Cultural and Social Arguments.* Some cultures with discontinuous political histories privilege art, particularly literature, as a prime nation-building tool (viz. France, Russia). That is not the case in the United States. A text does indeed hold the United States together, but that is a legal text. The Constitution is the only text that matters for the larger project of soldering the nation. No artistic canon serves that function; art is, and will remain, a rather low-level factor in the grand and ongoing project of building the national and international community. The Humanities might offer us private understanding, pleasure and consolation. Or they might imagine they are serving a constructive public function, when in fact, especially since the Vietnam War, they serve only the critical function of unmasking the operations of power in language largely impenetrable to a wider public.<sup>4</sup> Or even where they are intelligible, they fail to communicate their value to a wider public. They serve no constructive public function.
- (iii) *The Scientific Argument.* Despite its medieval origins, the modern research university is the child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The

---

<sup>3</sup> See Harpham, p. 149 for an account of the British situation; for an example of this kind of argument in the U.S. context, see the Council on Foreign Relation's 2012 Independent Task Force Report, "[U.S. Education Reform and National Security](#)."

<sup>4</sup> See Harpham, Chapter 6.

Enlightenment produced two related modes of arriving at knowledge, the experiment and the model (used by both the sciences and the social sciences). While neither of these modes claims absolute truth, both arrive demonstrably closer to an understanding of universal, unchanging nature, beyond mere interpretation. The knowledge produced by the Humanities looks soft by comparison, forever relative, forever a matter of “mere interpretation.”

- (iv) *The Vocational Argument.* Research has demonstrated that university disciplines must do at least one of three things to draw the support of university administrators. To be successful, the discipline must either (i) be devoted to the study of money; or (ii) be capable of attracting serious research money; or (iii) demonstrably promise that its graduates will make significant amounts of money.<sup>5</sup> The university study of the Humanities is thought to score zero on each count. The fact that Humanities enrollments are declining merely shows that departments are failing in the vocational marketplace. Students are voting intelligently with their feet.
- (v) *The Technological Argument.* Human societies, both literate and non- literate, have universally understood themselves through works of art that require deep immersion. In the twenty-first century, however, deep immersion is no longer the order of the technological day. New technologies disfavor the long march of narrative, just as they militate against sustained imaginative engagement. Students born after 1990 will not read paper books; much more significantly, they might not read books at all. The study of the “deep-immersion” art forms is the study of shrinking, if not of dying arts. Instead of lamenting that phenomenon, we should adapt to it. If we support the Humanities, we should

---

<sup>5</sup> James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield lay out this set of principles in [Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money](#) (University of Virginia Press, 2005): see pp. 5-6 and Chapter 4.

support media studies, not the study of the high arts.<sup>6</sup>

These well-attested arguments hostile to the Humanities are by no means trivial. Each will be addressed in the course of this report, as we attempt to formulate the possibilities and promise of the Humanities at the undergraduate level in Harvard College.

Rather than addressing the research culture of the Humanities, or graduate pedagogy in these disciplines, this document focuses instead on our biggest challenge and opportunity, that of undergraduate education. Our aims, indeed, are even more delimited, since we focus on undergraduate Humanities education in the institution we know best, Harvard College. If our document is elsewhere applicable, we will be delighted. We speak, however, with aspirational confidence in the first place to our immediate intellectual community.

Our document was commissioned by Dean Diana Sorensen, whom we thank for extraordinary and dynamic leadership. A committee, whose members, consultants and logistical helpers are listed below, collaboratively compiled this document over Fall and Spring Terms 2012-13. We divide the presentation into three parts, the first two of which are descriptive: (A) Statistical Data about the Teaching of the Humanities in Harvard College; (B) Historical and Current Traditions in the Arts and Humanities; and (C) Aspirational Invitations.

---

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Toby Miller, "[Strategy for American humanities: blow them up and start again](#)" (*Times Higher Education*, 11/8/2012).

## (A) The State of the Humanities at Harvard College: the Statistics

Before turning to discursive treatment of our subject, we look first to statistical description of our position. That quantitative description confirms some of the somber force of the arguments just made; in fact, however, the data also point positively to where our real opportunities and challenges lie.

We begin with broad national figures. Between 1966 and 2010, Bachelor's Degree Completions in the Humanities halved nationwide, falling from 14 to 7% of all degrees taken (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

Between 1987 and 2010, the story is more stable, but shows no rise from about 11% of all degrees taken (Figure 2; Figure 3 shows in what Humanities subjects students graduated in 2010).

When we turn to Harvard College, the overall picture of Humanities concentrator numbers over the last 60 years is one of slow to steep decline, depending on how one defines the Humanities. Without counting History as one of the Humanities, the percentage of Humanities concentrators falls from 24 to 17; counting History, the fall is steeper, from 36 to 20 (Figures 4-5). The news with regard to “would-be” concentrators is also negative: Figure 6 shows a steep decline from 27% to 18% of pre-freshmen “would-be” concentrators between 2006 and the class of 2016. The actual percentages of Humanities concentrators between 2003 and 2012 also declined, more gently, from 21 to 17% (Figure 7). So did the number of enrollments in Humanities courses decline slightly between 2000 and 2011, from 26% to 24% of

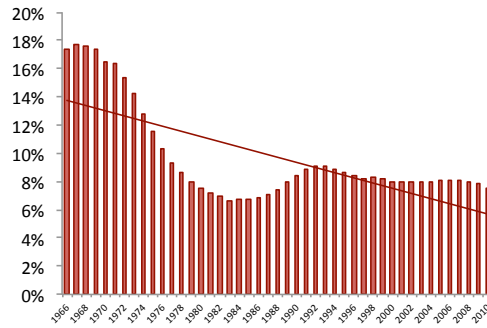
---

<sup>7</sup> See the [Humanities Resource Center Online](#) for more details and additional data.



# NATIONAL STATISTICS

**Bachelor's Degree Completions in the Humanities (As a Percentage of All Bachelor's Degree Completions), 1966-2010**



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Data System

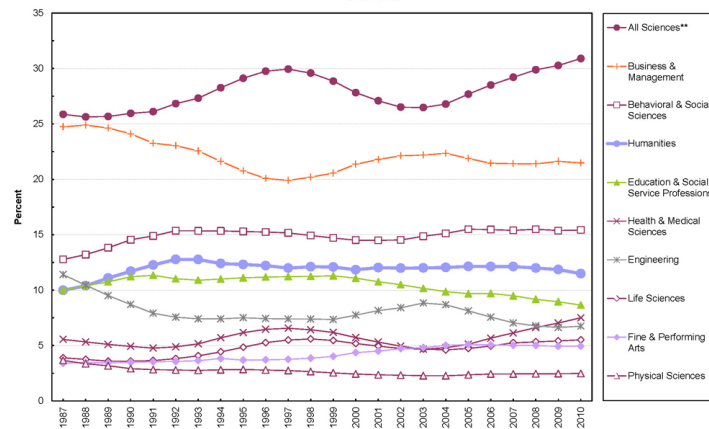
Humanities Indicators, 2012  
American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Fig 1

<http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/humanitiesData.aspx>

# NATIONAL STATISTICS

**Figure II-1b: Shares of All Bachelor's Degrees\* Awarded in Selected Academic Fields, 1987-2010**



\* Excluding "second majors" (see Figure II-1c for data on these degrees).

\*\* All sciences referenced in this figure (excludes agricultural sciences and those in the National Science Foundation category of "Interdisciplinary and Other Sciences").

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 research data system, IRES/CASTAS.

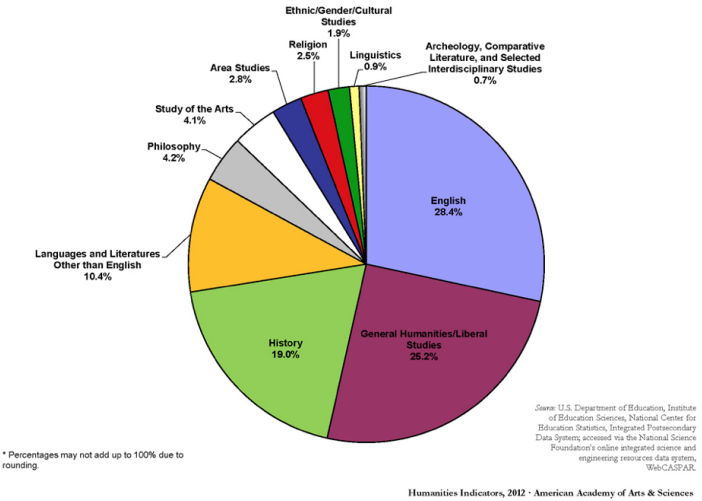
Humanities Indicators, 2012 - American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Fig 2

<http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/humanitiesData.aspx>

# NATIONAL STATISTICS

Figure II-2: Distribution of Humanities Bachelor's Degree Completions among Disciplines, 2010\*

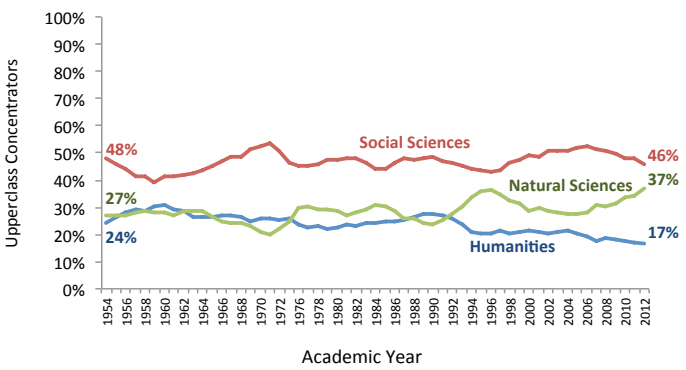


<http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/humanitiesData.aspx>

Fig 3

# HARVARD STATISTICS

Radcliffe and Harvard College Concentration Trends 1953-54 to 2011-12



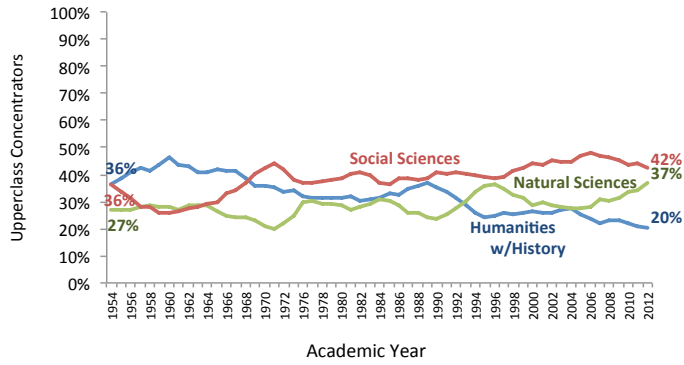
Note: History is in the Social Sciences  
Source: FAS Office of Registrar

Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

Fig 4

# HARVARD STATISTICS

## Radcliffe and Harvard College Concentration Trends 1953-54 to 2011-12



Note: History is in the Humanities  
Source: FAS Office of Registrar

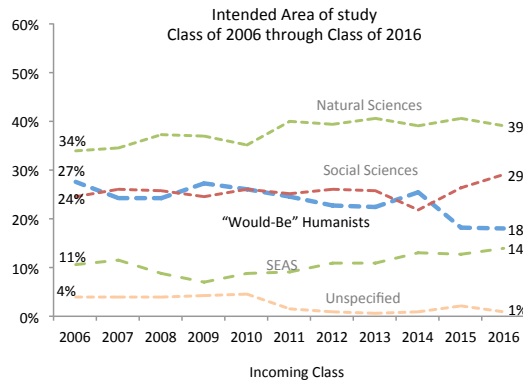
Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

Fig 5

# HARVARD STATISTICS



## The percentage of "would-be" Humanists is declining



Data Source: Office of Admissions

Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

Fig 6

# HARVARD STATISTICS



The percentage of students concentrating in the Humanities is also declining

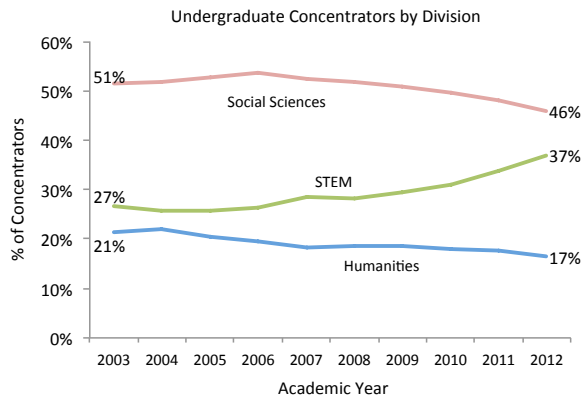


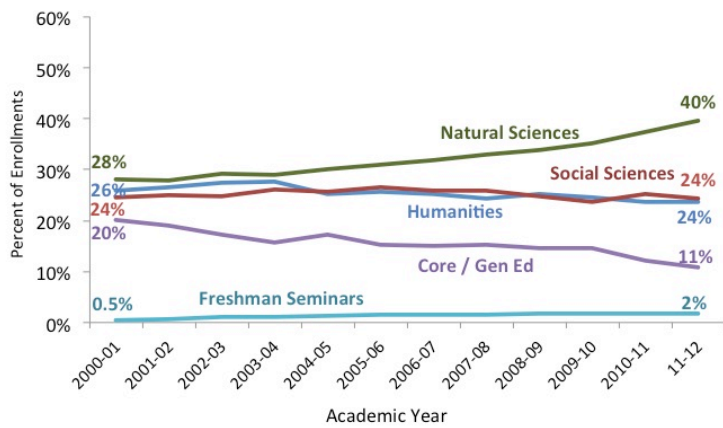
Fig 7

Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

# HARVARD STATISTICS



Course Enrollments by Field of Concentration



\*\* Courses excluded: IND-STUDY, TIME-A, TIME-C, TIME-R, TIME-T  
Percentages include 300/3000 courses

Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

Fig 8

Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

all enrollments (Figure 8). It might be noted that this slide reveals that, over the last decade, while enrollments in Humanities and Social Science courses held more or less steady, enrollment in General Education courses declined by 9 percentage points. Over the same period, enrollments in Science courses increased by 12 percentage points. What portion of the decline in General Education enrollments falls within those courses that would otherwise have been categorized as being in the Humanities will require further analysis, as part of the scheduled review of the General Education program.

How do we account for these overall pictures of decline? Two standard arguments have tended to hold sway over the last few years among humanists within Harvard. Falling Humanities concentrators, so these arguments run, is (i) Harvard-specific; and (ii) caused by financial aid. Neither of these arguments withstands scrutiny. Figure 9 shows our peer institutions very much level pegging for Humanities concentrators, and unpublished statistics from Harvard College demonstrate that there is only a small differential in Humanities concentrators between fully financially-aided students and all other students.<sup>8</sup>

If those arguments turn out to be without force, do statistics devoted to movement within the College offer more purchase on the state of the Humanities? Over the last 8 years, more than half of students who as pre-Freshmen indicate an intention to concentrate in a Humanities concentration end up in a different division (Figure 10).

---

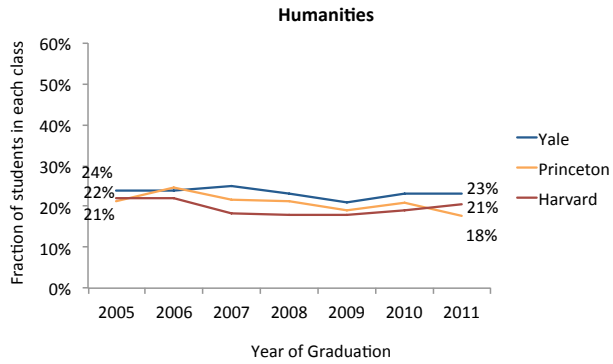
<sup>8</sup> The false assumption that financial insecurity causes students to pursue purely vocational studies is not new. Institutions made possible by the Morrill land-grant act of 1862 were often founded on practical and vocational curricula, but soon increased their emphasis on the liberal arts, partly in response to student demands. See Andrew Jewett, [Science, Democracy, and the American University](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chapter 1 (especially pp. 30-33) and Stanley Aronowitz, [The Knowledge Factory](#) (Beacon Press, 2000), Chapter 3.



# OUR PEERS



## Peer comparison: Humanities concentrators



Note: To make peer data comparable across schools, history is included in social science division

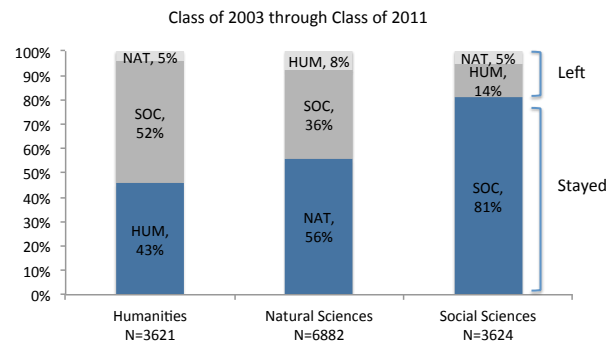
Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

Fig 9

# HARVARD STATISTICS



## Percentage of students who first declared a concentration in their originally intended field of study

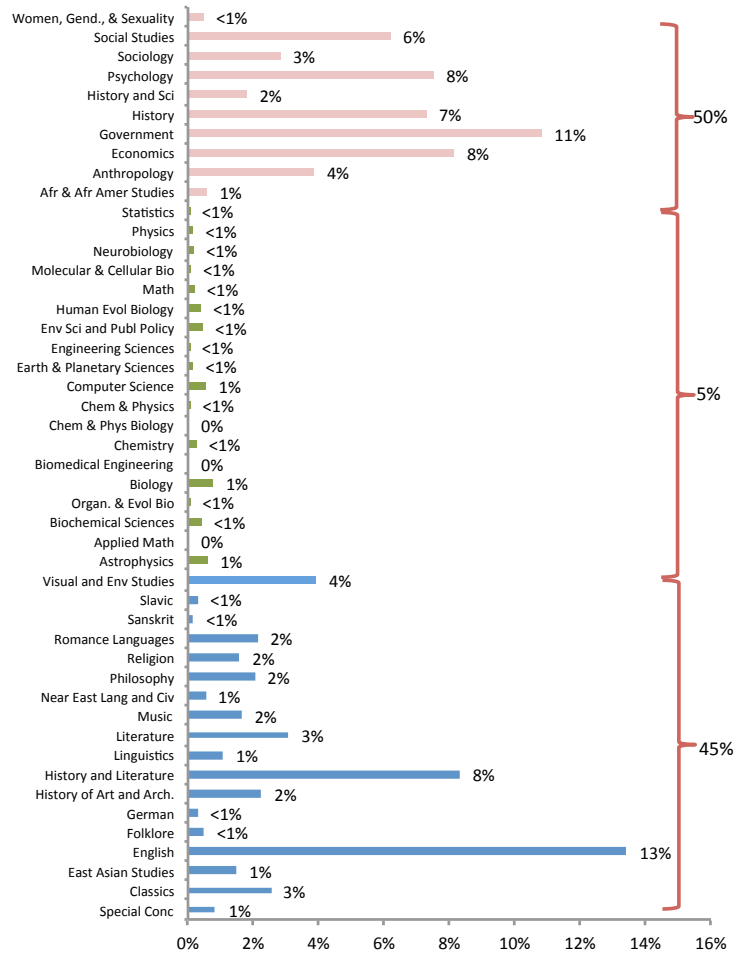


Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

Fig 10

# HARVARD STATISTICS

What do the would-be humanists study?



Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

Fig 11

50% graduate in a social science, 27% in either Government (11%), Psychology (8%), or Economics (8%) (Figure 11). Students stating an intention to concentrate in a Humanities discipline are much less loyal to that intention at concentration declaration (57% exodus) than students stating an intention to concentrate in a social science (19% exodus).

**These negative figures direct humanists' attention to two areas in particular: (i) the freshman experience, which is where we lose a striking number of students who matriculate with an intention to concentrate in a Humanities discipline; and (ii) the social sciences, who draw our intenders in striking numbers.**

The news for Humanities concentrations, however, is by no means all negative. According to Harvard College's own surveys, student satisfaction with their concentration tends to be consistently higher in Humanities concentrations than in other divisions. Once students declare a concentration, they remain faithful to Humanities concentrations in impressive and rising numbers (Figure 12): in 2011, 93% were faithful to their original Humanities declaration. And, finally, the information we have for *why* students choose a Humanities concentration suggests that intellectual curiosity and opportunity to contribute positively to society are primary motivators. Factors such as parental pressure and usefulness for a career, however much we should take these seriously, turn out to sway the decision of those who choose a Humanities concentration least (Figures 13-18). Of course such statistics might reflect students' internalized understanding of what they feel they should say, but that self-image is itself worth serious reflection.

Figures 19-21 depict the gender balance of divisions between 1981 and 2012; a

narrowing of the gender balance in other divisions is matched by a widening in the Humanities. Nationally, some indicators suggest the following: (i) that Humanities Concentrators, in applications to professional schools (e.g. Medicine, Law), succeed at least as well as, and sometimes better than, applicants with first degrees in other divisions;<sup>9</sup> and (ii) that the job satisfaction of Humanities concentrators in some professions (e.g. Teaching) is high and a little higher than that of concentrators from other divisions (Figure 22). As stated above, training in Humanities disciplines frequently produces a vocation to transmit that culture to others.

---

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, “[Does Your Major Matter?](#)” (*Forbes.com*, 10/29/2012).

Fig 12

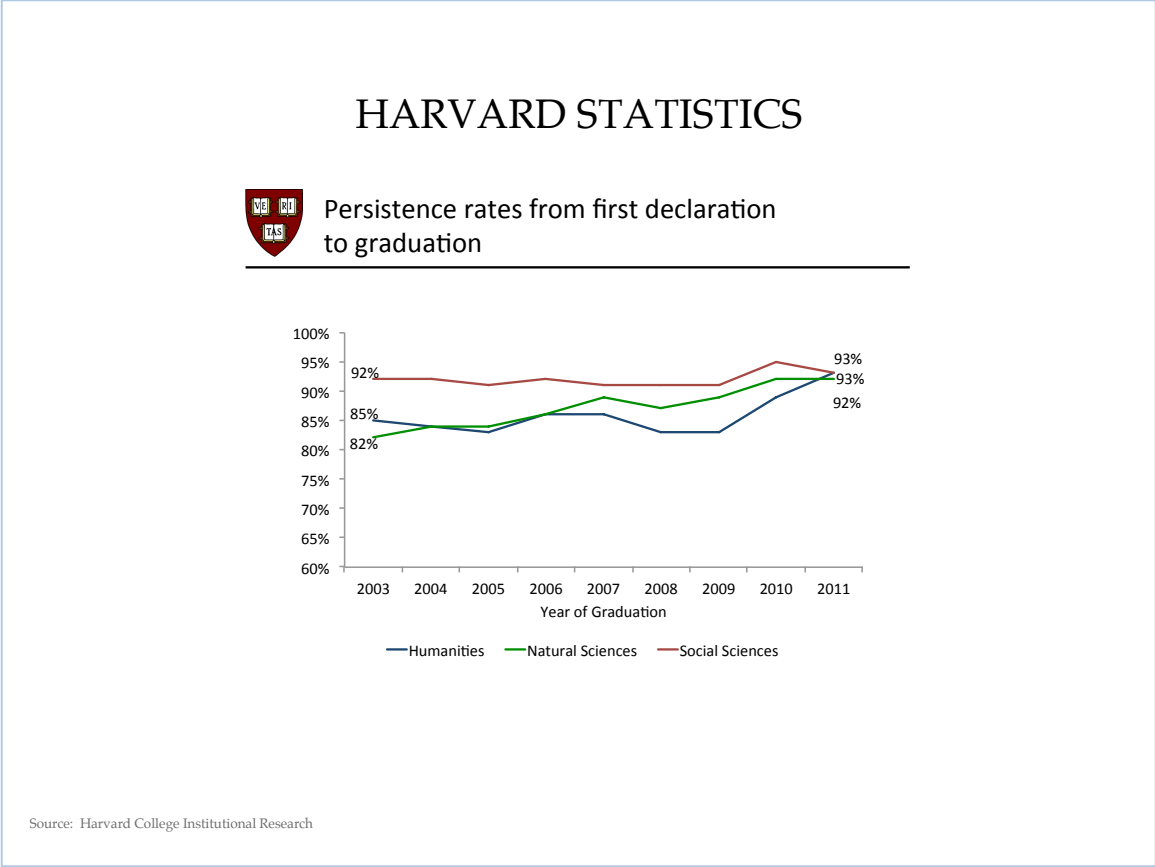


Fig 13

### UNDERSTANDING STUDENT INTEREST

COFHE Survey of Entering Freshmen Time 1

- Administered in August 2012 before students arrive
- 1689 Entering Freshmen from the Class of 2016 were invited to participate. 1533 completed the survey, resulting in a 91.3% response rate.
- Response rates for individual questions varied (not unusual for surveys where every response is not mandated). Percentages presented throughout this report were calculated using all responses received from the item in question.

Data: COFHE New Student Survey



# FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENTS' ANTICIPATED MAJOR BEFORE COLLEGE

## Self-development & Curiosity

- Intellectual curiosity in a subject area that is of interest
- Longstanding interest of mine
- Opportunity to contribute positively to society
- My goal of self-development

## Experience Before Harvard Academic

- A particular class that sparked my interest
- A particular teacher that sparked my interest

## Usefulness of major for career

- The extent to which the concentration keeps options open for the future
- Usefulness of the concentration for a particular career
- Opportunity to pursue a career that is prestigious or well respected
- Opportunity to pursue a career in which you will earn a lot of money
- Usefulness of the concentration for graduate or professional school

## Experience Before Harvard Extracurricular

- A particular extra-curricular activity
- Research Experience
- Volunteer experience
- Work experience

## Advice

- Advice from a teacher
- Parents' opinions and wishes
- Advice from my friends
- Printed or electronic materials from Harvard
- Advice from other students who attended Harvard

Data: CofHE New Student Survey

Fig 14

Table 1  
Factors for choosing a major

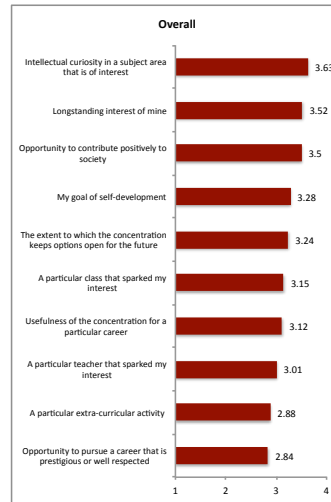
	VAR	H	NS	SS	ENG	Overall
<b>Self-development &amp; Curiosity</b>						
Intellectual curiosity in a subject area that is of interest	HAR4_8	1	1	1	1	1
Longstanding interest of mine	HAR4_5	2	2	3	5	2
Opportunity to contribute positively to society	HAR4_24	3	3	2	2	3
My goal of self-development	HAR4_7	5	4	5	6	4
<b>Experience Before Harvard Academic</b>						
A particular class that sparked my interest	HAR4_9	4	5	7	7	6
A particular teacher that sparked my interest	HAR4_10	6	7	8	10	8
<b>Usefulness of major for career</b>						
Usefulness of the concentration for a particular career	HAR4_18	9	5	6	4	7
The extent to which the concentration keeps options open for the future	HAR4_19	8	6	4	2	5
Opportunity to pursue a career that is prestigious or well respected	HAR4_23		8	9	9	10
Usefulness of the concentration for graduate or professional school	HAR4_20					
Opportunity to pursue a career in which you will earn a lot of money	HAR4_22			10	8	
<b>Experience Before Harvard Extracurricular</b>						
Research Experience	HAR4_3		9			
A particular extra-curricular activity	HAR4_6	7	10	9		9
Volunteer experience	HAR4_4					
Work experience	HAR4_2					
<b>Advice</b>						
Advice from a teacher	HAR4_11					
Parents' opinions and wishes	HAR4_1					
Printed or electronic materials from Harvard	HAR4_14					
Advice from my friends	HAR4_13					
Advice from other students who attended Harvard	HAR4_12					

Note. 4-point liker scale was used (1=Strongly Disagree, Strongly Agree).

Data: CofHE New Student Survey

Fig 15

## TOP TEN REASONS BY CONCENTRATIONS OVERALL

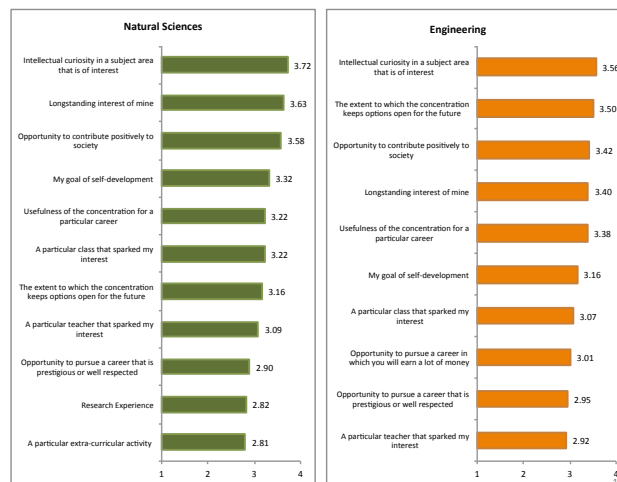


Note: 4-point likert scale was used (1=Strongly Disagree, Strongly Agree).

Data: COFHE New Student Survey

Fig 16

## TOP TEN REASONS BY FIELD OF STUDY

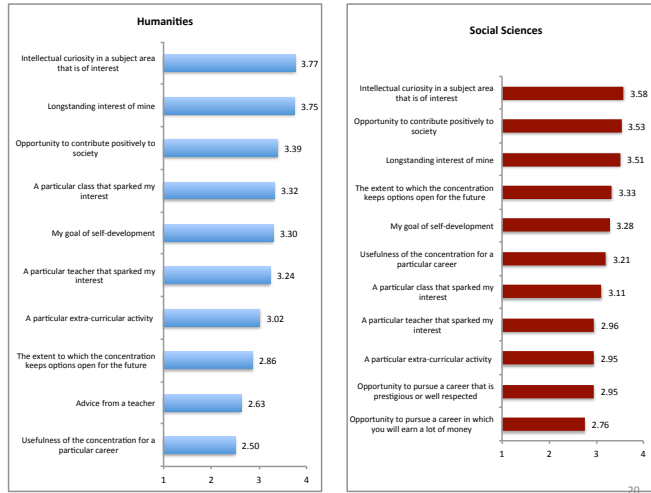


Note: 4-point liker scale was used (1=Strongly Disagree, Strongly Agree).

Data: COFHE New Student Survey

Fig 17

## TOP TEN REASONS BY FIELD OF STUDY



Note: 4-point likert scale was used (1=Strongly Disagree, 4=Strongly Agree).

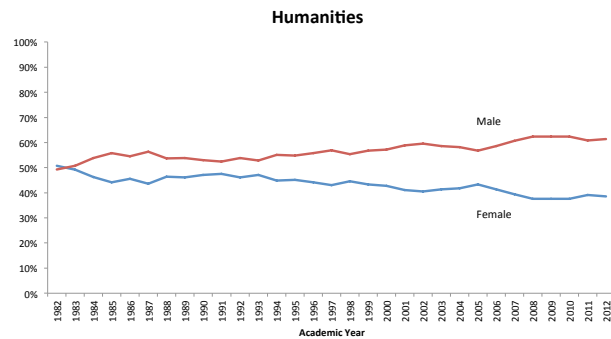
Data: COFHE New Student Survey

Fig 18

## HARVARD STATISTICS



### Gender Distribution by Each Division by Each Academic Year



Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

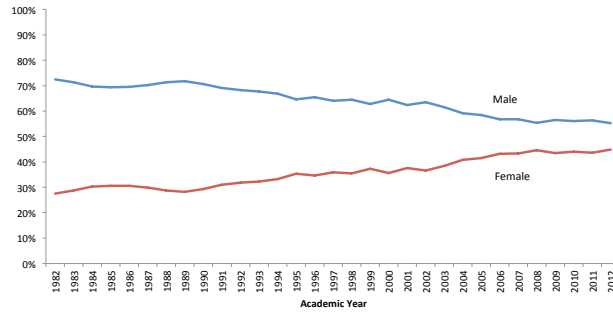
Fig 19

# HARVARD STATISTICS



## Gender Distribution by Each Division by Each Academic Year

### STEM



Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

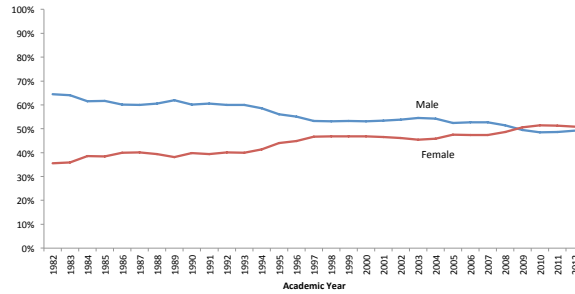
Fig 20

# HARVARD STATISTICS



## Gender Distribution by Each Division by Each Academic Year

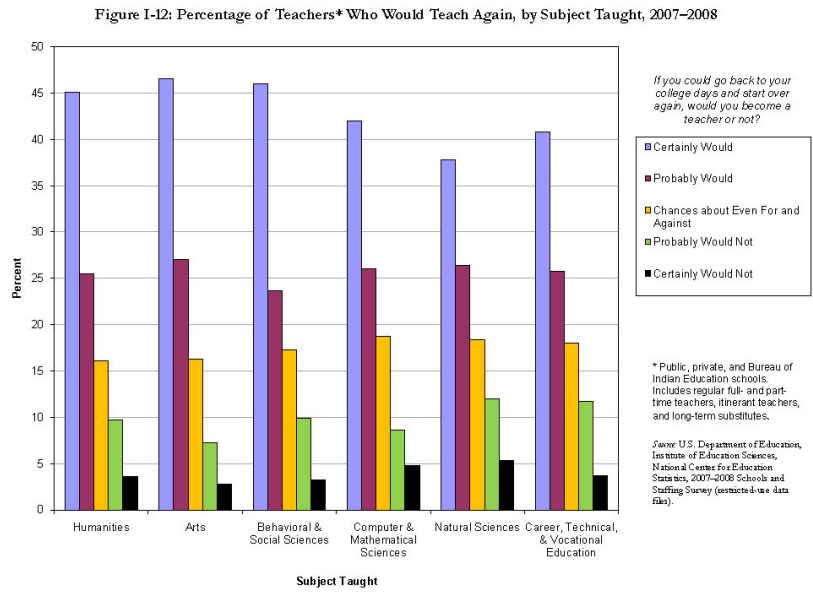
### Social Sciences



Source: Harvard College Institutional Research

Fig 21

Fig 22





To summarize: The statistical information we have with regard to concentration choice in Harvard College underlines the following:

- The decline in Humanities concentrators is not Harvard-specific.
- Financial aid plays a very minor role in students' choice of concentration.
- Harvard is losing Humanities concentrators to the Social Sciences.
- Most Humanities concentrators are lost during the first three terms.
- When students come to Harvard, they show interest in concentrations based on their curiosity about the subject matter, experiences in high school and on their desire to contribute positively to society.
- Advice from others and, in particular, parents' opinions and wishes do not play a significant role in students' anticipated choice of concentration.
- There is small variation in the relative rank of factors contributing to anticipated choice of concentration. The Humanities concentrators appear to be the least careerist in their orientation, while Engineering and Social Sciences concentrators seem to be the most careerist.

To invite: Looking forward, these same statistics reveal or at least suggest that:

- we have less a “crisis” in the Humanities in Harvard College (we are doing a lot right!) than a challenge and opportunity (we can do better);
- we should continue to produce such high levels of student satisfaction in Humanities concentrations by continuing to do what we do;
- we should arrest and reverse the decline of concentrator numbers by focusing on freshmen.

## (B) Historical and Current Traditions in the Arts and Humanities

### (i) Historical Traditions in the Arts and Humanities

Although the tradition of the Liberal Arts can be traced to Antiquity, it was only in the Middle Ages that they were established as part of a university curriculum. Seven in number, and consisting of the *trivium* (“three ways”: grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (“four ways”: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy), the seven Liberal Arts in turn served as a propaedeutic, i.e., handmaidens to the master discipline, philosophy, identified, in turn, with theology. The diagram of the seven liberal arts in the twelfth-century “encyclopedia,” the *Hortus deliciarum* (“Garden of Delights”) encapsulates this understanding of education, from which, in keeping with Platonic tradition, poetry was excluded as a fiction with no bearing on the truth.<sup>10</sup> The twelfth century, however, marks precisely the period in which modern fiction (Latin *integumentum*), along with the modern European vernaculars, emerged as a category of human, as opposed to divine, creation with its own claims to authority and authenticity.

It was only in the later Middle Ages, however, at least in Europe (as opposed to other areas of the globe in which there developed analogous institutions of higher learning), that the Humanities emerged in anything approaching their modern form. The *studia humanitatis*, which distinguished certain fields of study (above all, rhetoric, philology and history), from theology, and which later maintained its separation from science, represents the central contribution of Renaissance Humanism to a lasting intellectual and pedagogic tradition that transcends the moment of its origins.

---

<sup>10</sup> Harvard’s Visual Information Access includes [an image](#) of this diagram as depicted in a nineteenth-century copy (the original manuscript was destroyed in 1870).

Influenced by humanism (both civic and Christian), the framework of education expanded to include historical and philological inquiry, which were closely connected with one another (witness Lorenzo Valla's 1440 exposure of the Donation of Constantine as a hoax).<sup>11</sup> This critical, philological exercise of recovering accurate forms of source texts ("*ad fontes*"), which requires rigorous technical skills and deep historical knowledge, remains a fundamental activity and/or model of humanistic scholarship.

From those fifteenth-century origins, Humanism had many dimensions, not only scholarly in the narrow sense, but civic as well. Humanism and the Humanities were not to be confined in their impact to the proverbial ivory tower; they were intended to transform the world through humane, enlightened action. Understanding was to inform action as well as contemplation. In addition to the accumulation of knowledge, Humanism dedicated itself to the cultivation of certain applied practices (e.g., rhetoric) deemed useful to "good government," to invoke the title of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's famous fresco in Siena. The link between historical study and training in the classics established rhetoric—the art of heuristics and persuasion so despised by Plato—as an essential component of politics and civic discourse (cf. the busts of celebrated rhetors encircling the exterior of Sanders Theater). The Humanities were thus thought of as having a constructive role, even if part of that role lay rooted in techniques of debate and critique. From the beginnings of the philosophical tradition, critique, understood as critical inspection (and introspection) of one's self (*Gnothi seauton; Scito te ipsum*) provided the foundation for any form of constructive

---

<sup>11</sup> Valla's contribution to philology is summarized in the "Evaluation" section of Lodi Nauta's [entry on Valla](#) in the free online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

knowledge.

The Renaissance further witnessed a transformation in the status of art-making, which came to be recognized as an intellectual as well as a manual activity, to the point that artists often surpassed their patrons in prestige.

The study of the classics remained an integral part of education well into the modern era. Antiquarianism fostered an interest in archaeology, which in turn fed a critique that undermined traditional notions of truth, anchored, above all, in religion. This strain of inquiry also had the effect of adding artifacts to written documents as essential embodiments of human experience and endeavor. As hermeneutical disciplines, humanism and historicism came to be closely interconnected in their mutually reinforcing insistence on contingency and context.

Not to be confused with secular humanism, the Humanities in their historical development nonetheless can only be understood in terms of their dialectical relationship to religious thought. Figures such as Erasmus testify to the perceived compatibility of Humanism and Christianity. At the same time, the late eighteenth-century origins of modern hermeneutics (as opposed to exegesis) lie in large part in the history of bible criticism, which over time came to see the bible as a historical document made by different human hands, as opposed to being the product of divine revelation. Critique is thus central to any understanding of the Humanities, whether conceived in historical or in contemporary terms.

As higher education no longer focused on preparation for the clergy and shed its denominational character in the nineteenth century (University College, founded in

London in 1826 as a non-denominational institution, claims Jeremy Bentham as a spiritual father, if not one of the actual founders), the university took on its modern, primarily secular cast. The study of the vernacular languages (their philology and their literatures) developed alongside that of Greek and Latin; Comparative Literature and Linguistics assumed their place alongside classical philology. The nineteenth century also witnessed the development of the modern discipline of Art History.

This very brief history of the Western genealogy of the Arts and Humanities points to an ongoing, dynamic, triple tension within our disciplines. History bequeaths us traditions of the Humanities as (i) disinterested, critical scholarship designed to uncover historical truth; (ii) the instructor of technical, applicable skills; and (iii) as the promoter of enlightened, engaged civic action that trains students constructively to understand their own humanity and that of others. In each of these functions, the Humanities, like all the Liberal Arts, proclaim their liberal status, freed from the immediate pressure of economic survival, from the pressures of vested interests in the production of knowledge, and from ideological or religious pre-judgment. Of course the Humanities look to the world beyond the academy, which, apart from anything else, makes them possible. Of course the liberal disciplines emphasize the transferrable skills of a liberal education (notably cogent, critical thought and persuasive powers of speaking and writing). Of course our study is motivated one way or another by the needs of now. But a liberal education is not *determined* by these pressures: it stands back from, and adjacent to those pressures; reaches deeper, and looks for and from a longer, more disinterested perspective.

*(ii) Current Traditions in the Arts and Humanities*

The Humanities currently suffer from lack of public comprehension of their practice. We therefore complement the concise historical description just given with a more precise account of how the Arts and Humanities are currently practiced.

Teaching and learning in the Humanities notionally conform to one of four models. We stress that the flesh-and-blood form of any one of these ideal types will not be found in the environs of Harvard Yard, but we present these types heuristically: (i) skeptical, detached critique; (ii) appreciative but disinterested enjoyment; (iii) enthusiastic identification and engagement; and (iv) artistic making. The first three are scholarly, the fourth a practical tradition. We begin by describing the scholarly positions, before sketching the fourth tradition of artistic making.

Each of the scholarly positions has its history. Skeptical, principled detachment derives ultimately in the West from fifteenth-century philology. As stated above, humanist philologists in fifteenth-century Italy began the vast and unending tradition of going back to original sources through philological analysis. As they did so, they inevitably critiqued the error—sometimes the deliberate, self-interested, institutionally produced error—that had obscured and distorted the meaning of original texts. In order to discover the original meaning of a text, philologists and their historicist descendants had to distrust the text as they received it, and had to distrust their own prejudices as they read texts. They practiced a suspicious hermeneutic.

The second tradition, of disinterested artistic enjoyment, derives from eighteenth-

century Enlightenment aesthetics. In the eighteenth century, as Europe emerged from 150 years of fierce religious conflict, European intellectuals needed to invent an autonomous space for Art, since without that space, large swathes of the artistic tradition had necessarily to be jettisoned, as expressive of one now-partisan religious tradition or another. By focusing disinterestedly on the beauty and the form of objects, not on their ideological claim, Europeans were able once again to reintegrate what had become a profoundly fragmented archive, riven as it had been by violent political and religious struggle. The ability to look again at a whole artistic tradition came with a corresponding obligation to disown practical interest in the values (e.g. political or especially religious) expressed by the artifact. Disinterested appreciation learned to agree to differ.

Our third tradition, of enthusiastic identification, derives especially from late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism. Instead of forever claiming difference from the past, the romantic claims identification. Instead of positing historical discontinuity, as the skeptical philologist does, the Romantic posits deep continuity. In the nineteenth century this identification took nationalist form, as writers and artists claimed to have located a continuous national spirit running through specifically national traditions. The philological skeptic will repudiate presentism, and look instead to the past “in its own terms.” The Romantic enthusiast, by contrast, will embrace the “past” as now and us. The past is not dead (“it isn’t even past”); it lives and we can embrace it.

Each of the three scholarly positions has its characteristic distance from the object of study. The skeptic maintains a principled detachment from the object of study in every way. Disinterested enjoyment recognizes ideological difference but nonetheless

finds artistic affinity with the object. And engaged, enthusiastic identification dissolves distance almost altogether; the enthusiast would transform the object of study into the subject of study.

Each has its characteristic relation to the collective project of the university and society at large. The skeptic stands to the side of collective projects to critique them. Disinterested enjoyment denies the practical function of art in any collective project except the experience of liberty through the experience of art itself. And the enthusiast constructively participates in collective projects.

Each produces its distinctive scholarly character type. The skeptic is severe and ascetic; the disinterested enjoyer is a genial participant in small groups of fellow art lovers; and the enthusiast finds powerful solidarity with all who share the identification.

These three traditions are inextricably intertwined within the pattern of our own departmental formations in the Humanities: some departments were grounded on the skeptical tradition (e.g. The Classics), whereas others were grounded originally on Romantic persuasions (e.g. departments devoted to the particular literary traditions of different European languages), even if their practice is now heavily inflected by either the tradition of skeptical critique or that of disinterested aesthetic enjoyment. Other departments still (the engaged enthusiasts), founded since the 1970s, are grounded on forms of more recent identification (e.g. gender, race).

These separate traditions tend to be resurgent within specific historical moments. Moments of collective optimism produce constructive forms of enthusiastic



identification (e.g. post-WWII Allied optimism about “universal” humanism). Moments of profound historical disillusion, in the wake of mass- manipulated violence, produce, by contrast, skeptical detachment and critique (e.g. post-WWII Frankfurt school pessimism about universal humanism). The most powerful currents in Humanities research and teaching over the last thirty years have been inflected by moments of collective disillusion and pessimism (notably by the experience of the Vietnam War). Those moments provoke scholarly skepticism and distrust, or what has been called hermeneutic suspicion, of the official line. Those historical experiences tend to produce a Humanities teaching that stands back from the collective project to critique its premises. The task is to unmask the operations of power.

Each tradition is immensely precious.

Without the tradition of philological critique, we lose the capacity to be sure of the authenticity of our texts, or to see the past as different, or to critique the practice of power with historical evidence. For this tradition, the past, and segments of the past, are foreign countries, whose internal logic and coherence must be respected. To understand the past, we must not identify with it. An overall understanding of historical progression will depend on recognition of a sequence of partially discontinuous, historically-differentiated periods. Without the tradition of philological critique, we also lose what footholds we have to withstand the mesmerizing, often dehumanizing force of powerful institutions, whether political or commercial. All great humanistic pedagogies need to provide students with a critical, corrective voice that stands aside from, and looks beyond, the manipulative, dehumanizing forces of the present. Critique provides that corrective voice.

Without the tradition of eighteenth-century aesthetics, we lose the capacity to contemplate heterogeneous, often mutually-hostile traditions in the same disciplinary frame, now available for all to understand, regardless of the religion, race or gender of either the producers or receivers of the artifact. We also lose the capacity to enjoy the beautiful, life-enhancing, pleasure-producing, always liberating experience of all great imaginative art, from cave paintings to installations. We lose the capacity to enjoy art from traditions not our own. Imagine for a moment the impoverishment of a life restricted to art that conformed to the political order of the day (Soviet Realism, for example).

Without the tradition of Romantic identification, we lose one way constructively and collectively to build new forms of community. The transformative and constructive phase of feminism, for example, emerged from literary criticism in the 1970s, as women critics identified with women across history. The same is true now, for example, for subaltern history, black history, or queer history. These liberating, transformative social movements derive in good part from the practice of the Humanities.

Each tradition is also vulnerable to disabling weaknesses. The tradition of philological critique that sees the past only in its own terms is necessarily committed, ultimately, to the irrelevance of the past. In the very act of scrutinizing an object, the philologist activates its flight. That same tradition of relentless critique can alienate the object under consideration, austere forbidding any identification. Relentless critique finally disowns any constructive, collective role for the Humanities, standing instead to the side of, and undoing, the collective project. In the classroom, that austere tradition can forbiddingly alienate its own students.

The tradition of disinterested aesthetic appreciation must neutralize the full force of artistic traditions precisely by restricting consideration to the artistic form of the object. By retreating to consideration of artistic form alone, we lose sight of the wider nexus of forces that produced a work of art, and which the work of art itself seeks to inflect. The current structure of the General Education curriculum in Harvard College enshrines this weakness in its separation of “Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding” from “Culture and Belief.”

The enthusiastic tradition can, and has, produced forms of illusory, trans-historical, essentialist identification. It is capable of dissolving any sense of the integrity and difference of the past. It is also capable of tribalist exclusions of those not regarded as part of the trans-historical identity.<sup>12</sup>

Each tradition will also have its characteristic enemy: the philological, historicist skeptic will target the linguistically incompetent and the presentist; disinterested aesthetic appreciation will repudiate the philistine; and the enthusiast will be on the lookout for the bigot or the antiquarian.

These three powerful scholarly traditions will inevitably inflect the intellectual and pedagogic practice of all Humanities departments and teachers one way or another. They have produced innumerable, more specific traditions. In practice, disentangling them departmentally or individually will often be difficult if not impossible. Many, if not most, serious disagreements within the Humanities derive from the pressure of

---

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Harpham's discussion of the unfortunate consequences of nineteenth-century “philhellenism” (Chapter 2).

one of these traditions conflicting with another, just as the dynamism of teaching and research in the Humanities derives from their competitive interaction.

A fourth strand of Arts and Humanities contribution is that of creative making. Visual art making, musical performance, drama and creative writing each have a history in Harvard College. The College, indeed, stands on the verge of significantly raising the profile of the creative arts.<sup>13</sup>

It is not for the current document to adopt the absurd position of advocating one of these four traditions over another. None will disappear; none will indefinitely hold the field to the exclusion of its three competitors. Each has a powerful historical reason for existing. Each teacher in the Arts and Humanities will freely engage in self-scrutiny for each course offered in the historical conjuncture in which we find ourselves. It is, however, for this committee to delineate our deepest traditions, and to point to developments in the Humanities that promise dynamically to readapt those traditions to the opportunities of our current predicament. It is also for this committee to articulate our aspirations to bring the insight we derive from these traditions to bear on the challenges of our contemporary world.

### **(C) Aspirational Invitations**

#### *(i) The Power, the Danger, and the Hope of the Arts and Humanities*

The authors of the mid-twentieth century program in General Education at Harvard

---

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the 2008 [Report of the Task Force on the Arts](#), whose findings are summarized in President Drew Faust's [Statement](#) on the report.

College felt strongly that the supreme goal of American education was to offer to its students a unifying sense of purpose and ideal. They lamented the lack of purpose that they felt plagued America in the wake of the Second World War, and bemoaned the consequent lack of clarity in American education about what its proper aim should be. “As recently as a century ago,” the authors of the so-called Red Book wrote in 1945, “no doubt existed about such a purpose: it was to train the Christian citizen... [But] this enviable certainty has largely disappeared.”<sup>14</sup> We may wonder whether this kind of cultural certainty is indeed enviable; it could easily be retrograde and stultifying instead. But in any case, the relation between a culture’s sense of its own purpose and identity, on the one hand, and its guiding educational principles, on the other, cannot be denied. In the mid-twentieth century at Harvard, these were brought together in a unique and admirable way: a Harvard education in the humanities aimed to articulate and clarify for its students the civic responsibilities of American citizens living in and aspiring to preserve a free democratic society.

The General Education program at Harvard that grew out of this aim was much-loved by students and faculty alike for almost thirty years. But by the end of the 1960s it had come to feel to many that the program was preachy and unsubstantiated; it seemed to undermine the sense of free inquiry that was supposed to be central to an education in the humanities, and it seemed to claim a unity and authority about who we should be as a people that was at odds with the thought that our sense of identity and purpose might be to some extent up to us to discover. In lamenting the loss of purpose that the ideal of the Christian citizen once grounded, the aim of the Gen Ed program was indeed to replace that ideal with another; but

---

<sup>14</sup> [\*General Education in a Free Society\*](#) (Harvard University Printing Office, 1945), 43.

this new ideal was nevertheless nostalgic in the sense that it shared with its predecessor the aspiration to certainty and unassailability that had characterized the nineteenth-century understanding. Perhaps the aspiration to this kind of certainty is itself a danger. The fundamental sources of value in a culture are neither necessary nor universal; they change over time. The culture that fails to recognize and nurture these changes risks stagnation or, worse yet, decline. That said, not every change is equally good; there must be something on the basis of which we advocate for some changes over others. There is a constant tension, therefore, between the necessary stability that our current self-understanding offers and the renewal of our self-understanding that its current inadequacies seem to demand. The maintenance of this productive tension is crucial to any culture worthy of the name. At the same time, therefore, that we aspire to ground our sense of ourselves on some stable understanding of the aim of life (e.g., the responsible citizen in a free society) we must constantly aspire to discover anew what the best way to characterize and cultivate such an aim might be. The humanities are the site where this tension is cultivated, nurtured, and sustained.

The mid-twentieth century was not the first time a culture worried that its traditional customs and beliefs were eroding, nor the first time that this concern was tied up with the perceived nature of the educational enterprise. But humanistic education was not always seen as the savior that Harvard's mid-century faculty made it out to be. The Sophists of fifth-century Athens were often seen, for example, as disreputable teachers who offered a humanistic education that undermined, rather than focused, the students' sense of Athenian identity and values. Aristophanes' comic play *Clouds* presents this potentially dangerous and corrosive aspect of the humanities. Produced in Athens in 423 BC, the play opens with Strepsiades, an

elderly Athenian, facing legal action for non-payment of debts. Hoping to defeat his creditors in court, Strepsiades enrolls his son Pheidippides in the “Thinkery,” where he is to gain the rhetorical skills needed to win their case. Having learned to make the weaker argument defeat the stronger, Pheidippides does indeed go on to save the family riches. But the power of his rhetorical skill cannot be stopped, and soon it leads the boy into a cynical disrespect for the customs and mores of his culture. With his newfound sophisticated talent, Pheidippides coolly and impudently enters into a debate in which, turning the standard cultural practice on its head, he gives a powerful argument in favor of a son’s right to bully and beat his own father. He then goes on to perform this “justified” act. Strepsiades, enraged at the way in which an education at the Thinkery has undermined his son’s sense of traditional cultural values, leads a frenzied attack on the school to end the play.

Aristophanes’ play is funny because of the ridiculous portrait it paints of the so-called Wise Men (Sophists) who have mastered the humanistic skills of argument and persuasion. But it is also deeply conservative, suggesting as it does that the core values of a culture are always sacrosanct, and that it is inherently dangerous for people to learn to address and even potentially to undermine a culture’s most basic sense of itself. Aristophanes is certainly right that there is danger here, and the humanities are in this sense nothing if not a potentially perilous pursuit. But a culture that has no mechanism for bringing its most fundamental commitments into question is a culture that risks stagnation and even potentially moral decline. Not every value embedded in a culture is *eo ipso* good. We need only to look at our own history of slavery or the disenfranchisement of women to establish this fact. But by what mechanism does a responsible change in cultural mores occur?

The answer to this question, indeed the very need to ask it, may be at the heart of humanistic inquiry. The philosopher Bernard Williams suggests that unlike the humanities, scientific progress aims at “vindicatory” advance.<sup>15</sup> In the sciences, a new concept or theory may supplant its predecessors and when it does the transition aims to be recognizable to both sides as a justifiable improvement. The theory of relativity, for instance, is not on equal footing with Newtonian mechanics; it properly subsumes it and justifiably takes its place. But if Williams is right, then the humanities are not like this: the domains they characterize—domains of freedom and justice, of reason and goodness, of beauty and right and perhaps even of truth—are essentially human domains; their history is constitutive, in part, of what they are. A crisis of legitimacy, of course, can strike: the sense of “liberty” and “equality” on which our nation was founded, for example, may come no longer legitimately to exclude application to African Americans or women. But when this alternative conception of liberty comes to provide the basis for a new legitimacy, then even though we rightly consider this an improvement or advance, our new conception does not exist independent of its history but in virtue of it. As such, it stands constantly on the knife-edge of that history, pulled by fits and starts both back towards its more ancient manifestations and forward towards ever-newer ones. On such an account of the humanities, we cannot have Hegel or Marx’s certainty that history is the rational development and progress of Spirit, and that we are steadily advancing in our humanistic discourse towards an eschatological end of perfection. But in its place we get an ever living, breathing humanistic domain. It is then in this ambiguity, perhaps, in this sensitive relation to our own history and this hopeful aspiration to a better future, that a true education in the humanities must reside.

---

<sup>15</sup> [“Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline”](#) (*The Threepenny Review*, Spring 2001).



Education—especially education in the traditional humanistic disciplines that engage philosophical, historical, literary, and artistic works, or that teach students how to write or talk persuasively about such works—is therefore a double-edged sword: it can be the scourge of a culture or its greatest hope. Both dangerous and at the same time potentially liberating or redemptive, the humanities can help to clarify one’s sense of purpose or to undermine it, can help to identify possibilities for greatness in a culture or can artfully destabilize an existing world. An understanding of the power of the humanistic enterprise, therefore, and an understanding of how responsibly to engage it and employ it, should be central aims of any education in the humanities. A student who studies the humanities at Harvard can hope to get in touch with the power that this kind of sensitivity reveals.

The remaining sections of this document suggest practical ways in which we might put students in touch with the power of the Humanities.

*(ii) Specialization/Generalization*

In 2007 a Visiting Committee asked an assembled FAS Humanities department to isolate its big challenges in the coming years. Members of the department responded by predicting the “Next Big Thing” for scholars in the particular discipline.

There was nothing especially myopic in that discussion at the time: of course any department must position itself with regard to intellectual movements in the profession. Six years on, however, the set of answers given then are, in retrospect, revealingly incomplete.

University departments have three profoundly interdependent constituencies: faculty, graduates and undergraduates. None of these three can survive, let alone flourish, absent the flourishing of the other two. When we think about work in the Humanities, however, we sometimes treat these interdependent constituencies as a single constituency. The imminent challenge to which the department in question possibly failed to point in 2007 was the challenge of undergraduate education and the diminution of undergraduate concentrators. We spoke then as warriors of the theory and culture wars of the 1980s and 90s, when our profession was dynamically convulsed by powerful and contrastive intellectual movements, humanist and (mostly) anti-humanist. When we looked to what our profession needed, we looked at allies and opponents across the aisle; we looked that is, at the state of the profession.

From the vantage point of 2013, it seems that we were fighting, as the generals habitually fight, the last war. For while we were focused on our professional allies and opponents, another, much bigger challenge was stealing upon us unawares. We should have been looking to the culture at large, whence our undergraduates came, and whither they would go. Instead we were looking inwards, to issues of vital concern within the academy, to be sure, and to issues that might become of vital concern beyond the academy, in time. We were not, however, looking to what our undergraduates needed in the here and now.

A choir of hostile voices, for the most part from outside the profession, has remarked

on this myopia, rising to a crescendo over the last decade.<sup>16</sup> Colleagues in state universities will need to address such voices directly, since many of them appeal to disgruntled taxpayers. Some state universities have already responded to these and other pressures (notably diminished tax revenues after 2008) with the axe.<sup>17</sup>

That kind of philistine objection has not, happily, been voiced from within, or to our knowledge directed at, Harvard, even if an attack on the Humanities in any sector is cause for concern for all humanists. What has been audibly heard from within Harvard, however, is the footfall of undergraduate feet away from Humanities concentrations, as suggested above by statistics underscoring a decline in Humanities concentrators.

Faced with evidence of falling concentrator numbers, Humanities faculty tend to blame someone else: the philistines who do not understand what we do; over-pragmatic parents and students who diminish the quality of their present by thinking over-nervously about their professional future; or Harvard admissions. Recent data neutralize arguments against the last two of these putative culprits. With regard to the first putative culprit (i.e. the philistines), the Humanities have always had, and

---

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Diane Auer Jones's [commentary](#) (*Chronicle of Higher Education Blogs*, 4/9/2010) on a recent [special report](#) on the crisis of the humanities ("Graduate Education in the Humanities," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 2010).

<sup>17</sup> To cite just a handful of examples: *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported last year on the "uneven decline" in graduate programs in the humanities as compared with the sciences and social sciences ("[Cutbacks in Enrollment](#)," 3/11/2012); the University of Pittsburgh has stopped admitting students to its graduate programs in German, religious studies, and classics ("[Humanities Retrenchment at Pitt](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*, 4/24/2012); SUNY Albany completely eliminated its programs in French, Italian, Classics, Russian, and Theater (see Stanley Fish's [commentary](#) on nytimes.com [10/11/2011]).

always will have pragmatic detractors,<sup>18</sup> but before we Humanities professors feel too self-satisfied, we might reflect that it is not only the inveterate philistines who fail to understand what we are up to; we have failed to address sympathetic public curiosity as to what we do.

Many of our would-be concentrators end up in non- Arts and Humanities concentrations. Faced with that exodus, we might do otherwise than to blame someone else, and not only because blame is never a smart way to persuade anyone to be an ally. We might instead engage in self-scrutiny, by asking ourselves whether or not we are failing to address urgent questions about their world that students feel will be answered by social sciences. Statistics are vital, but we all know that they will never give us the definitive truth of our situation. So we might in any case try a thought experiment: let's assume for the moment that the solution lies with us.

That experiment might profitably involve reaffirmation of the generalist tradition of undergraduate teaching. We might reflect that we have tended to emphasize specialist knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) over the formation of truly educated citizens (*Bildung*), a division built deep into the shape of our disciplines over the century and more of the modern disciplines.<sup>19</sup> We have, that is, possibly become too specialized, allowing the research culture of our faculty and graduate constituencies to dominate the general needs of the undergraduate. Can one effectively specialize without a

---

<sup>18</sup> Peter Cohan's [proposal](#) that each department should receive funding in proportion to its graduates' salaries is an extreme example of purely economic reasoning ("To Boost Post-College Prospects, Cut Humanities Departments," *Forbes.com*, 5/29/2012; such reasoning is soundly rebutted in Martha Nussbaum's *Not For Profit* [Princeton University Press, 2010]); a stronger and more thoroughly reasoned case for the pragmatic is to be found in John Carey's search for the useful in *What Good Are the Arts?* (Faber, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> See Harpham, p. 12 and Chapter 3.

frame of general knowledge in the first place? Is our ideal undergraduate an applicant to graduate school in our discipline, or a person trained as, in the words of an English department colleague, an “internationally competent mediator of cultural history” ?<sup>20</sup>

We might reflect on our definitions of “discipline.” We remain committed to disciplinary training: interdisciplinarity without discipline makes no sense; and we must of course continue to deliver disciplinary training to undergraduates who do wish to enter Humanities graduate programs. We might also reflect, however, that the percentage of our undergraduates who continue to graduate school seems to be very small; most go out into the world. Our responsibility to that majority is in part, as has been said, to provide disciplinary training; in part, however, we also need to capture the four precious years we have with our undergraduates to introduce them to as wide and coherent a range of materials, in different languages and different media, as serious attention will permit.

In many cases, our definitions of “discipline” are in any case unduly restrictive. The disciplinary formation of departments of literature, for example, mostly took place at the end of the nineteenth century. That formation was in good part underwritten by distinctively nineteenth-century nationalist and philological convictions.<sup>21</sup> Even if we have moved well beyond the nationalist convictions that generated them, these institutional formations continue to shape the professional structure of the disciplines and to guide graduate-level specialization. Are, however, our beginning undergraduates best served by studying one discipline (literature) within a series of

---

<sup>20</sup> Helen Vendler, private communication to James Simpson, 11/10/2012.

<sup>21</sup> Harpham, Chapter 2.

linguistically self-enclosed, competing units? Even if, as we expect, our disciplinary formations survive, might our undergraduate teaching not be energized as teachers move beyond departmentally-defined “disciplines,” and beyond their immediate zones of expertise (as some instructors do already), in their undergraduate courses?

As the profiles of our disciplines shrink, we might also turn to those works that magnify the discipline, sometimes known as the canon. That revisited canon would of course be duly enlarged in the light of gender, ethnic and geographical challenges made to the very notion of the canon since the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> (No movement has so thoroughly and dynamically energized the Humanities as feminism, since the 1970s.)<sup>23</sup> Every new work for which persuasive claims are made changes the very structure of the canon: as T. S. Eliot argued, with a new work, “something...happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it.”<sup>24</sup>

A revisited canon could, however, be more flexibly sensitive to the conviction that works of enduring force and fame remain worth reading not least because great works of art never speak with unequivocal voice for one, closed position. That open-ended self-division is the very condition of their greatness. We are capable of forgetting the simple truth that “the main work of the Humanities is to ensure that the [great] books are placed in the hands of each incoming wave of students and carried back out to sea.”<sup>25</sup> This might not necessarily mean restricting ourselves to

---

<sup>22</sup> See any of the books listed in Rachel Donaldio, “[Reading List: Books on the Canon Wars](#)” (*New York Times*, 9/16/2007).

<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum’s essay on women’s studies gives a sense of this impact ([Cultivating Humanity](#), Chapter 6).

<sup>24</sup> T.S. Eliot, “[Tradition and the Individual Talent](#)” (*Selected Essays* [Faber and Faber, 1932]; available online at [poetryfoundation.org](#)).

<sup>25</sup> Elaine Scarry, “[Poetry Changed the World](#)” (*Boston Review*, July/August 2012).

works considered great by tradition; but it will mean teaching only works whose transmission in our classrooms we consider vitally important.

Any education, whether in the seminary or the secular, Enlightenment institution, must promise “salvation” of sorts. Of course we in the Enlightenment institution will not promise salvation as educators at Harvard College in 1636 would have, but we will need to deliver a version of reparative *veritas* that makes a worldly difference.<sup>26</sup> Faced with that challenge in 1945, [General Education in a Free Society](#) articulated a central cultural function for the Humanities in a world that would soon need to take stock of the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Most faculty would now take issue with the Euro-centric and gender assumptions of that document, but few would dispute that it rose to the mighty challenge of its historical moment. The scope of this document is less ambitious than that of *General Education in a Free Society*. The ideal of a generalist undergraduate education in the Humanities will, nonetheless, help us rise to the challenge of our historical moment.

### (iii) *Disciplinarity & Interdisciplinarity*

By definition, a liberal arts education encourages students to oscillate between the demands of specialization and a general education. Employed to characterize many different models of scholarship, ranging from the multi-disciplinary to the so-called trans-disciplinary, the term “interdisciplinarity” could also be used to define a mode

---

<sup>26</sup> The “Rules and Precepts” announced at the college in 1646, for example, require that every scholar at Harvard consider the main end of his studies to know God. (Recorded in [College Book I](#), and reprinted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College* [Harvard University Press, 1963], p. [333](#), and, less accurately, in the 1623 pamphlet *New England's First Fruits* [Sabin's Reprints, 1865], p. [26](#).)

of inquiry particularly appropriate to exploring the space in which this oscillation takes place. In the context of undergraduate education, interdisciplinarity, understood not simply as a mixing of materials or even of methods, but as a conversation among disciplines, provides pedagogical approaches that both satisfy and transcend specialization.

In today's world, the pressure to specialize is almost irresistible. Specialization affords mastery, competence and expertise, all of which require patient application and years of hard work, not to mention excellent training and tutelage. Whether diagnosing a disease, dating or attributing an unsigned work of art, deciphering an inscription, analyzing a piece of polyphony or subjecting a hypothesis to rigorous philosophical scrutiny, certain tasks are best not left to amateurs, grateful though one might be for their ardent appreciation. Mastery of a single discipline provides the only reliable ground for interdisciplinary exploration. Moreover, interdisciplinarity should never be allowed to justify a curriculum that is horizontal, rather than vertical, in nature. As subdivisions of the university dedicated to the transmission and transformation, through teaching and research, of particular bodies of knowledge, academic departments remain the fundamental building blocks of undergraduate education.

All that said, however, we laud the ideal of interdisciplinary undergraduate teaching. As long as the undergraduate experience in North America has been defined as training in the liberal arts, any undergraduate degree has consisted of more than the sum of its disciplinary parts. Interdisciplinarity means more than mere distributional requirements. Ideally it builds on the accumulation of complementary areas of competence, whether defined in terms of basic skills, such as the mastery of a foreign language, or sophisticated skills in analysis and interpretation. Just as a physician



requires, or at least ought to acquire, an understanding of ethics, so too a student of language and literature requires an understanding of rhetoric.

In addition to permitting the combination of skills, interdisciplinarity, understood as a method, could be considered a skill in itself. A focused, frontal assault on any particular task does not always produce the best results; sometimes it is best to seek direction through indirection. Allegiances among disciplines sometimes need to shift in order to tackle (or untangle) complex questions. Paradigm shifts or revolutions in human knowledge often came about owing to the consideration of questions or approaches that previously had been regarded as irrelevant to the understanding of any given body of material. The model holds no less true of the Humanities than it does of the Sciences.

Interdisciplinarity supplies the corollary of disciplinarity. Only by testing the received boundaries of a particular discursive field can students, with appropriate guidance, question whether the perimeter defined by traditional practice might productively be redrawn. An undergraduate education provides students with ample opportunity to engage in intellectual experimentation; if anything, undergraduates could be encouraged to take more risks in this direction. The recent addition of double concentrations to joint concentrations among the range of options available to Harvard undergraduates represents an important step in this regard. Students are more, and aspire to be more, than apprentices; by virtue of their curiosity and idealism, they seek, not only training, but a well-rounded education that will prepare them both for a career and for life.

Whether from the perspective of a teacher or that of a student, effective pedagogy, let

alone success in the workplace, requires effective listening as well as polished speaking and writing. Interdisciplinarity offers an opportunity writ large to hear and consider different points of view, grounded in different materials or experience. In an increasingly interconnected, if not always more cosmopolitan, world, openness to fresh ways of framing problems is the order of the day. The same holds true for undergraduate education. Given that specialization inevitably requires further training in professional or graduate school, colleges remain the only arena in which broad foundations can be laid. Majors, or concentrations as they are called at Harvard, need not define a particular career path: with sufficient attention to a balanced curriculum, students can concentrate in the Humanities and still go on to law, business or medical school.

Mozart once remarked that music consists of the space between the notes. In the same spirit, one can observe that although the lines between the disciplines and the constellations they form constantly change, the continual reconsideration and redefinition of existing networks of knowledge constitute the heart of humanistic inquiry.

*(iv) Chronological range of an ideal training in the Humanities*

The Humanities give a central place to the contested nature of truth; study in these disciplines demands recognition and negotiation of different perspectives and experiences. The Humanities continue to provide the place in which the wide range of subjectivities that distinguish human beings from the world they inhabit (whether defined in terms of race, class, gender or cultural context, historical or contemporary) can be considered with the seriousness that range deserves. Far from a disqualification, therefore, the contested character of humanistic inquiry is thus

essential to its practice. As long as there are disputes about value, as opposed to valuations, the Humanities will continue to play an essential role in the education of anyone who claims to be humane. The empiricist mode of objective knowledge cannot save us from ethical abuses in the economic sphere, nor can it save the planet from our capacity to destroy it.<sup>27</sup> Not only, perhaps, but especially the Humanities make the question of value their explicit purview.

That definition of value necessitates wide access to the historical archive. The foreign countries of the past, no less than of the present, open our students onto a wide range of cultural difference and possibility. Thinking historically necessarily involves thinking about the specifics of time and place, but engagement with the past yields much more than a series of discrete case studies anchored in time and place. The past is a crucial dimension of humanistic enquiry. Close engagement with past societies encourages us to appreciate and question systems of value and meaning within our own. Healthy challenges to the traditional focus of a liberal arts curriculum on western civilization encourage us to ask not only how much of the past we should study, but also whose past. An ideal training in the Humanities would emphasize the study of both proximate and remote societies, in terms of space, time and/or self-conscious reception. To adapt a passage from Marsilio Ficino, quoted by Erwin Panofsky in a famous essay on the Humanities, “For indeed, a man may be said to have lived as many millennia as are embraced by the span of his knowledge of history.”<sup>28</sup> To Ficino’s notion of time, still bound to the encompassing arc of salvation history understood in Christian terms, can now be added many other

---

<sup>27</sup> Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, Chapter 1.

<sup>28</sup> “The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline” ([Meaning in the Visual Arts](#) [Doubleday, 1955], p. 25).

traditions encompassing the entire globe, a wealth of experience and knowledge that he could hardly have imagined.

Given this openness to the past, the Humanities as rooted in Humanism and rigorous interpretation remain essential to establishing and evaluating notions of truth based on evidence and experience as opposed to authority and tradition. The Humanities require that everything, including their own status and standing, be questioned constantly. In a historical perspective, the Humanities can thus be seen, not simply as traditional, but, to the contrary, as essential to the never-ending unfolding of tradition understood as transmission and transformation: the simultaneous reconstruction and dismantling of history and combination of memory and recreation that constitutes an essential part of all human societies.

(v) *Information, Interpretation and the Information Technology Revolution*

A humanistic education introduces students to culture, but works within two senses of the word “culture”: on the one hand, an eighteenth-century definition designed to distinguish a body of especially valuable artifacts (thus Matthew Arnold’s crude but often cited description of culture as “the best which has been thought and said in the world”);<sup>29</sup> and on the other, a broader, less restrictive consideration of what sense 7a of the *OED* helpfully defines as “the distinctive ideas, customs, social behavior, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period.”<sup>30</sup> This

---

<sup>29</sup> *Culture and Anarchy* (Smith, Elder & Co., 1869), p. [vii](#).

<sup>30</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, “[culture, n.](#)” Scholars such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams made this more expansive definition the founding principle of British Cultural Studies. See, for example, Hall’s “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” originally published in *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) and Williams’s entry on “culture” in *Keywords* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

second definition would include “popular culture.” The pedagogic ideals of most instructors within the Arts and Humanities will involve some mix of both traditions.

Whichever of these categories of culture we work with, the archive is immensely rich and large. We offer abundant materials (texts, media artifacts, and objects that range from the most casual and throwaway to the most monumental and highly crafted) through which to explore the problems, dilemmas and extraordinary variety of human experience.

The size of the archive has recently been underscored by the information technology revolution. The material now available to our students through electronic archives possibly offers, in its sheer quantity and variety, a golden age of humanities research at the undergraduate level, since our students can now readily access materials that have lain locked in research libraries for centuries. Electronic archives offer new oceans of material—an expanded historical range as well as range of media—and new ways of both mapping and navigating those oceans. Teachers of literature can access visual materials with much greater facility. Our electronic teaching platforms offer new pedagogic possibilities, even as they demand new competences.

These new forms of information storage and flow also pose challenges: will, for example, our future students lose the facility of immersion in long artistic forms? Will they find productive ways to apply the tools of close reading to the analysis of vast data repositories?<sup>31</sup> Above all, will our students be in a position meaningfully to

---

<sup>31</sup> The authors of [Digital Humanities](#) (MIT University Press, 2012), for example, argue that the Digital Humanities require new and more closely integrated conjunctions between “distant” and “close” reading (p. 39; see also p. 92).

evaluate and interpret that increased flow and variety of information? Will we as teachers be able to adapt to new forms of retrieval and “reading” permitted by the new technologies? Will we as teachers in the Humanities adapt to online teaching and learning?

This constantly changing technological context presents challenges born of new content, new tools, new competences, and new interpretive challenges. The great movement of critical philology in the fifteenth century was energized and challenged by the information technology revolution of printing; we feel energized by the transformative challenge of putting our traditions of interpretation to the work of navigating our exhilaratingly expanded archives. Content and interpretation are and have always been inextricably connected in humanistic studies. Archives are themselves cultural artifacts that must be built and interpreted with the expertise appropriate to their nature. Further interpretations are then produced from engagement with the archive, and are tested, refined and refuted either by re-examining the archive, or by reference to additional materials.

*(vi) Critique and Appreciation*

This document imagines a collective “reboot” of undergraduate teaching across the Arts and Humanities. This may mean adjusting the balance between those three constituent elements built into the history of our work: critique, appreciation, and engagement.

The practice of undergraduate teaching in the Humanities ideally fosters enthusiasm; in fact it promotes criticism as a species of enthusiasm, involving attention and

curiosity, making strange and making familiar.

This does not at all conflict with the fact that one of the major contributions of the Humanities over the past thirty years has been a project of critique: of revealing the extent to which culture serves power, the ways domination and imperialism underwrite cultural production, and the ways the products of culture rehearse and even produce injustice. This project of critique, built deep into our tradition, is not and cannot be completed; it remains a key component of the undergraduate and graduate study of literature, art, or music. In addressing the decline in Humanities concentrators we might, however, need to register the extent to which this critique has already permeated the study of literature and history in secondary education, and to counter a popular image of this kind of work as the sole occupation of the university intellectual.

Moreover, some of the forms of critical interpretation we see as hard-won and hard-taught skills might be less so to today's media-literate undergraduates, to whom it may not be news that the more loudly someone claims objectivity the more partisan they may be; that images are not transparent to their referents but constructed artifacts with their meanings circumscribed by context and caption; or that what presents itself as "reality" may be anything but.

One of the main factors in their choice of social sciences over humanities, students report, is the desire "to contribute positively to society." Undergraduate education in the Arts and Humanities corrects the misconception that the social can be separated from the cultural. First, it offers students knowledge necessary for civic life and professional practice. Why would one choose to enter the world of medicine, we ask,

without having encountered the thinkers who have expressed and explored pain, healing, empathy...or hubris? Why would one choose not to consider, before entering the world of business, what people have thought in various times and places about commerce, competition, enterprise...or greed? And how could one plan to practice law or politics without knowing how others have thought about the social good, the rights of individuals, what makes a good society...or a bad one? Obtaining such knowledge isn't self-indulgence or an educational luxury: it is the very least we can ask of those who would lead us.

Second, we demonstrate the place of the Arts and Humanities in society in the many courses that emphasize the social engagement of cultural workers. We explore the ways, overt and subtle, that the makers of shared texts, songs, and images shape public opinion and personal outlook alike, and we introduce artists, writers, and musicians who use their talents to build community, improve quality of life, or fight injustice.

Relatedly, those of us committed to criticism as critique might recognize a kernel of truth in conservative fears about the left-leaning academy. Among the ways we sometimes alienate students from the Humanities is the impression they get that some ideas are unspeakable in our classrooms. Confusingly, these may be ideas that they have heard from their parents around the dinner table, from the pulpit in their houses of worship, or from the media to which they have been exposed. It is not that as teachers we should pretend to speak from some point of uninflected objectivity, but that we should admit and mark the fact that opinions and orientations shape our thinking; acknowledge the fact that intelligent people may disagree; and encourage real debate rather than the answers our undergraduates are smart enough



to know we want to hear.

*(vii) Humanities as Distinct from Social and Natural Sciences*

Our statistics reveal that a large proportion (more than half) of our would-be concentrators end up declaring a concentration in another division (c. 50% in the Social Sciences). How might we respond to that phenomenon?

Variouly. We could advertise that rates of concentration satisfaction for most of the large Social Science concentrations are below that of most Humanities concentrations.<sup>32</sup> Humanities concentrators tend to develop the same deeply satisfying love for their discipline enjoyed by their professors. For many concentrators, that love becomes vocational, a calling to transmit a Humanities culture to others.

We should certainly point to the fact that the Social Sciences, along with other professional schools, have profound synergies with the Humanities: all great art and philosophy will be variously engaging with, drawing on, promoting and/or critiquing other areas of societal practice, whether medicine, theology, business, psychology, and law, for example. We should map the powerful interdisciplinary synergies and affinities our disciplines share with the social sciences. Once mapped, we should open those territories to our undergraduates.

We could point to the identity we share with the Social Sciences with regard to our impulse to address present-day needs. Because Humanities scholars and social

---

<sup>32</sup> See Figure 14, above.

scientists alike start from a particular historical position, we cannot pretend only to study “the past in its own terms,” or “the past for its own sake.” Of course, Humanities scholarship has been divided for at least 500 years as to whether the function of scholarship is to understand the past in its own terms or to serve the present.<sup>33</sup>

Humanists do teach philological skills that can cut through layers of prior interpretation and provide readings that are more faithful to past experience. The terms of our enquiry are, however, much broader: those terms are always in good part given to us, consciously or involuntarily, by our positions in history. We are part of history’s problem, and possibly part of its solution. The study of expressive artifacts is always, in one way or another, the study of now. When “now” changes (as it always does), so too do the terms of our enquiry change. Like social scientists, we in the Humanities navigate between the twin dangers of irrelevance, caused by studying the past solely “for its own sake,” and a “presentism” that neutralizes the power of our works by subordinating them to present needs and present powers. In the final accounting, we are not subject to the “fierce urgency of now,” even though we fuel and shape that urgency by drawing on the experience of other times and places.

All those profound synergies articulated, we might also wish, however, to differentiate the ways in which the Humanities address themselves to the world from the ways in which the social and natural sciences make that address. The following paragraphs articulate some of those differences.

---

<sup>33</sup> See Antony Grafton, [\*Defenders of the Text: the Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800\*](#) (Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 26-7; see also pp. 42-43.

The most notable difference lies with the posture with regard to the accumulated wisdom of the past. All “truth” is, for the scientist, of course, a hypothesis to be regarded as true until disproven. As long as that hypothesis resists challenges, it displaces and renders obsolete all previous scholarship. The Humanities, by contrast, do not regard historical experience as obsolete. Of course previous scholarship will often lose its power to illumine artifacts directly, but such scholarship remains part of scholarly tradition. Very much more importantly, however, great art and philosophy itself will always resist obsolescence: “age cannot wither [them], nor custom stale [their] infinite variety.” Our sense of what constitutes great art will change, but great art itself is not, and does not become, better or worse. In Humanities departments the rule of the present’s condescension does not apply. Only in Humanities departments (including History) is the entire treasury of the past open and ready for use. The canon of any art form will include works radically at cultural odds with each other (a royalist Dryden versus a regicide Milton, for example). Despite the radical ideological divisions within our archive, and despite the cultural differences that inevitably characterize our student body, our students are never blocked by gender, religion, ethnicity or present political persuasions as they enter the alternate worlds of imaginative human making and thought. They are instead invited to enter the flow of a long and evergreen tradition.

A second powerful difference concerns the relation of student and truth. University knowledge acquisition is habitually characterized (at Commencements, for example) as a matter of discovery of the never-before-known, or explanation of the never-before-understood. That characterization is indeed pertinent to the extraordinary, and often life-enhancing achievements of science. For scientific research is, by definition, motivated to describe past claims to knowledge as error, if at all possible.

To be sure, humanists make discoveries, of a new text or archive, for example. The truths discovered by humanistic learning are, however, less discoveries of the never-known than recoveries of the once-known. Often that once-known has been deliberately buried by powers that be, in which case recovery is a form of critical correction and courageous rebuke. Just as often, humanists recover forms of understanding and expression inevitably buried by the passage of time or the distance of space. Whether deliberately or inadvertently buried, the truths recovered by humanists are recoveries of “what has been lost / And found and lost again and again.”<sup>34</sup> We keep memory of certain pasts and awareness of certain presents alive and honest.

Humanistic recovery depends, as a result, on a dynamic interaction of cognition and recognition, a recognition premised on our capacity, by virtue of our humanity, to intuit human meaning across very large swathes of place and time.<sup>35</sup> Such recognitions in artistic experience are not, however, instances of *mere* repetition, *merely* reconfirmations of truths once known. On the contrary, the recognitions we experience in artistic and cultural history are memorable because we see a truth—we know the place, we see a face—as for the first time.<sup>36</sup> The recognition connects us with the known; the force of the recognition, in the present, is fresh and reformist.

Students in the Humanities therefore have a more intimate and irreducibly complex relation with the object of their attention. Neither nature nor much human behavior

---

<sup>34</sup> Eliot, “[East Coker](#)” (*Collected Poems 1909-1962* [Faber, 1974], p. 203).

<sup>35</sup> A view derivable from Gianbattista Vico’s [Scienza Nuova](#) (1725; for an overview, see the [entry](#) on Vico in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

<sup>36</sup> See James Simpson, “Cognition is Recognition: Literary Knowledge and Textual ‘Face,’” [New Literary History](#) 44 (Winter 2013): 25-44.

demand to be interpreted; expressive, imaginative artifacts necessarily do make that invitation. Our curiosity, wonder, and pleasure respond instinctively, in turn, to that communicative invitation. Works of human imagination and/or thought want to engage us, just as we love to engage with them. Our task of interpreting is the more challenging in these disciplines because we are ourselves always part of the interpretive problem, and part of the solution.

Empirical scientists must attempt to isolate significant variables and to take themselves out of the picture; they seek to move from inductive to deductive thinking. They seek, in short, to move outside history. Interpreters of crafted artifacts, by contrast, are faced with irreducibly multiple variables, including their own positions as interpreter. Our understanding of truth is therefore relational, in keeping with the etymology of the word “truth” itself (“troth”); our own position in time and place is irreducibly part of the truth at which we arrive. We cannot escape inductive thinking or the exercise of practical judgment.<sup>37</sup>

Humanists are forever, unashamedly, embedded in history, since we gain access to truth in and through history, not by stepping outside it. And given the centrality of interpretation in the adventure of the present, the distance between instructor and student is shorter in the Humanities classroom: both are on the spot, risking their hand.

---

<sup>37</sup> As Robert Proctor, among others, has pointed out, emerging scientific disciplines “need the wisdom of the past in addressing contemporary problems” (*Defining the Humanities* [Indiana University Press, 1998], p. 203). Disciplines such as conservation biology and environmental studies, which deal with irreducibly multiple variables, demand humanistic understanding to master in all of their complexity.

(viii) *Arts Practice*

One of the most important ways we emphasize the positive value of the humanities is by offering opportunities to make culture as well as consume it. Practicing art is basic training for what is variously understood as the experience, attention, or innovation economy. As practice in problem solving, sensorial engagement, creative thinking, or collaborative effort, art education has utility for contemporary professional and economic life; in fact, many have commented on the degree to which the freelance, flexible style of modern white-collar work itself takes the artist's practice as a model.<sup>38</sup>

Our students know this. In 2007, the Report of the Task Force on the Arts at Harvard made it clear that undergraduates here are remarkably active artistically. The sheer number of plays, concerts, and exhibitions on campus demonstrates the investment these high-achieving and acutely time-pressured students are *already* making in the arts. Yet because historically these activities have largely been conducted in extra-curricular arenas such as Houses, societies and clubs, students have not been encouraged to consider their work in the arts a way of learning equivalent to—and connected to—those in their courses and concentrations, and still less as a way of changing the world about which they learn. Refreshing our conception of education in the Arts and Humanities is part of the solution to this problem. Special funding initiatives now encourage the integration of making and practice into a range of courses across the college. This complements, and should point to the vital place of, the practice-devoted departments and programs in the Division of Arts and Humanities: Visual and Environmental Studies, Music and Creative Writing.

---

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Daniel Pink, [A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future](#) (Riverhead Books, 2005).

Useful as it can be, however, art is at home among the Humanities not only because of the ways practicing drawing—or photography, musical composition, or poetry—arms students with particular tools and aptitudes. It is because the work that happens in the Humanities—the work of putting the obvious into question and the commonsensical into relief—happens in art practice also. However, it happens there in a unique and powerful way. One can look at a drawing; one can appreciate and admire drawings. But it is something very different to hold a pencil and make a mark. It is something very different to face the innumerable choices that will make an image look the way it does; or to see anew, as one struggles to render them, the world’s shapes, lines, and spaces. Neuroscience is helping us to understand how the architecture of the brain literally changes as we learn and practice such skills. In practicing the arts, one builds connections that change the way one moves through the world.

In the other divisions of the university students learn about the world as it is. In the rest of the Humanities, they learn about how it was and how it might be. In art practice, they learn both to see the practical and imagine the possible; they not only learn about the world and themselves, they make and remake them.

(ix) *Disciplinary Skills/Transferrable Skills*

This document’s historical account of the *studia humanitatis* underlined a double tradition, both contemplative and active.<sup>39</sup> That active tradition involved commitment to ideals of good government, and thereby also necessarily involved technical training in the arts of *logos* broadly understood (i.e. arts of both the idea

---

<sup>39</sup> See also Jennifer Summit, “[Renaissance Humanism and the Future of the Humanities](#),” *Literature Compass* 9:10 (2012): 665-679.

and the word, to which we would now add the arts of image and sound). Humanists have always transmitted skills intrinsic to their disciplines, but also transferrable from them. Of course each discipline will transmit the skills intrinsic to itself. Each art, philosophical tradition or historical archive demands a specific *techné* of rigorous formal analysis. In addition to promoting those technical competences, we also unhesitatingly advertise the transferrable value of formal skills from university to the professional world beyond college. We would articulate that set of transferrable competences broadly thus:

- the ability to absorb, analyze and interpret complex artifacts or texts, often of foreign provenance;
- the capacity to write intelligently, lucidly, and persuasively;
- the ability to participate effectively in deliberative conversation;
- the capacity to speak intelligently, lucidly and persuasively.



## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we summarize the practical encouragements of our report thus:

- Even if we can certainly do better, we should continue to provide demonstrably excellent undergraduate teaching;
- we should arrest and reverse the decline of concentrator numbers by focus on freshmen;
- we should reaffirm the critical, yet generalist and interdisciplinary tradition of undergraduate teaching;
- we should enlarge what we are doing by focusing on the interface between the Humanities and other divisions (notably some of the Social Sciences) or even other schools. Of course we should not aim to imitate the Social Sciences, but our students do consistently express the desire to contribute positively to society; we might reflect on that in course definition;
- we should emphasize the career paths and job satisfaction that the Humanities do enable, both directly and via professional post-graduate schools.

Among the initiatives that would support the Arts and Humanities, we provisionally include:

- Art spaces in the houses
- An Arts & Humanities version of iLab
- Thought about how we might draw on the energy the students invest in extracurricular Arts and Humanities activities
- Encouragement to the Mahindra Humanities Center to add a

humanities component for undergraduates, on the model, duly scaled, of the Institute on Politics

- Resources for addressing the freshman-year challenge
- Thought about how we might mount both cross-division and cross-school courses, co-teaching with, for example, KSG, Public Health, Business School and Law School
- A strong humanities component added to Visitas and to the freshman orientation
- Exhibition spaces
- Multi-year funding financial support for internships
- New faculty positions, including a number of exchangeable FTEs (to ensure teaching in the departments is not lost)
- A letter from the President to incoming freshman pointing to small concentrations and emphasizing the lack of correlation between concentration and job choice

This document was composed over Fall and Spring Terms 2012-13 by the following Working Group: Professors David Armitage (History), Homi Bhabha, Co-Chair (English and Mahindra Humanities Center), Emma Dench (The Classics and History); Jeffrey Hamburger (History of Art and Architecture), John Hamilton (Comparative Literature), Sean Kelly, Co-Chair (Philosophy), Carrie Lambert-Beatty (History of Art and Architecture and Visual and Environmental Studies), Christie McDonald (Romance Languages), Anne Shreffler (Music), and James Simpson, Co-Chair (English).

The Working Group warmly thanks the following consultants: Professors Ann Blair

(History), Andrew Jewett (History), Parimal Patil (South Asian Studies), Jeffrey Schnapp (Romance Languages), Doris Sommer (Romance Languages), and Diana Sorensen (Romance Languages, Dean of Arts and Humanities).

We also thank the following for indispensable logistic support: Jenny Bergeron, Anna Dunavin, Odile Harter, and Karen Pearce.