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2015

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Martino, Andrew, "“The Endless Appetite”: Honors Education and the Spirit of the Humanities" (2015). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 410.

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“The Endless Appetite”: Honors Education and the Spirit of the Humanities

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Most thought-provoking for our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.

—Martin Heidegger

In a world that no longer privileges thinking, we might need to consider what we are asking of our students—and why—when we ask them to think. What follows is a manifesto of how honors education can serve as a resistant force against the increasing encroachment of a wholly utilitarian concept of education. With the costs of higher education on the rise, the call to justify getting a college degree has been indissolubly linked to the ability to obtain a job once the student graduates. What has been lost along the way is the justification of getting an education for the sake of enriching one’s life and one’s community, a model of education that is increasingly available only to the privileged. The humanities have taken the brunt of criticism aimed at such

a justification, but the jobs-based model that so preoccupies social discourse is a misguided objective that will eventually turn our work force into semi-literate specialists whose main task is to keep the economy moving.

In his 1854 novel *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens presents his readers with the figure of Mr. Gradgrind, a man interested in nothing but the facts. “Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these little boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else” (7). Those of us who have read *Hard Times* know that Gradgrind’s educational philosophy and practices have disastrous results for his children, Louisa and Tom, and surely we can assume that contemporary thinking about education, especially with emphasis on the STEM initiative, is a twenty-first-century echo of Gradgrind’s declaration. Mr. Gradgrind is not completely wrong; we need specialists who will be able to contribute to the work force and thus grow our economy. For a democracy to thrive, though, we must invest in a humanities-infused education that will give students a well-rounded, critical education, enabling them to become better, more productive citizens, and this is where honors education can play a vital role.

Honors colleges and programs across the country can pivot the discussion of educational value toward a more encompassing and enriching model by standing behind and reaffirming its core values, values that are firmly staked in interdisciplinary, critical, and reflective thinking practices. One need only attend any of the regional conferences in honors to see our students demonstrate these practices. Honors educators are in the position to move entire institutions in directions that individual departments and institutes cannot. Honors can reframe questions about the humanities through pedagogical theory *and* practices. Simply reframing the questions is not enough, though; we must push against the increasing tide of an educational system based on a business model.

Martha Nussbaum’s recent book *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* is a compelling indictment of the thinking that seeks to privilege a purely techno-scientific, skills-based curriculum at the cost of the humanities. Nussbaum does not single out the education system of the United States but argues that the current crisis felt by the humanities is global:

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens

who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. (2)

Nussbaum's analysis is not hyperbolic hysteria but a no-holds-barred, honest analysis of where we are heading in higher education. The current educational climate does not privilege thinking but instead seeks to populate a workforce with highly skilled and obedient men and women. Nussbaum goes on to add, "The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance" (2). Her language is strong but again warranted given the current state of higher education and the perilous state of the humanities in particular.

If we continue to equate education with use value, then we are headed toward an intellectual and creative abyss. This new conception of education sacrifices the spirit of the humanities, which, because it cannot be measured, has no value in scientific discourse. Designing rubrics that can measure the spirit of the humanities is a near-impossible task, yet that spirit can and does manifest itself even in courses that reside outside the supposed territory of the humanities. Courses in mathematics, economics, science, and engineering, to name just a few, enhance and are enhanced by traditional humanities courses. Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* is an excellent example of how this type of enhancement occurs. Piketty's analysis of capital and the symptoms of inequality resulting from it draws on his reading of nineteenth-century literature, especially the novels of Jane Austen and Honoré de Balzac. This use of literature as hard data should be cause for celebration in a world where the novel is too often considered an endangered species. Honors education can take the lead in demonstrating precisely how all disciplines are infused by the spirit of the humanities beyond traditional humanities courses.

The question being asked, mostly by the middle class and especially by those who are sending their children off to college when they themselves did not attend, is "What value does the humanities have in an already competitive job market?" This notion of "value" implies a paradigm of exchange. In other words, the student attends college in order to negotiate the value of her degree in the job market. In a market context, the value of the humanities has been called into question of late, especially as the administrative and curricular paradigm for colleges and universities moves closer to a business model. The question becomes one of use-value pure and simple: a degree in the humanities has value only if it can be exchanged for steady employment.

By privileging use value in education, we do grave harm to our students and communities. The time has passed when we consider colleges and

universities, other than a select few, to be centers of thought. The current trend in higher education is turning universities and colleges into skills-based training centers, substituting competencies for knowledge. However, as anyone who teaches in the humanities knows, vital skills are practiced and refined in our courses.

Honors programs are a model of what the humanities can teach us. An honors curriculum promotes a willingness to push the boundaries of how we think about educational value, moving us beyond use value and toward exploring epistemological questions. While an honors credential on a student's transcript can and should be a boon for those entering the work force, this boon does not define us. At the core of an honors education is a solid foundation in the humanities, one that values smaller classes, critical discussion, and close readings of primary texts. C. Grey Austin asserts in his monograph *Honors Programs: Development, Review, and Revitalization* that honors education serves the most curious students. "The intended outcome of an honors education is a knowledgeable *and* effective person" (13). To arrive at such a person, we promote and engage in educational practices that allow students to ask the big questions that confront society writ large, using educational models that, as Austin writes, include the "Socratic dialogue, the Oxford tutorial, the German seminar and the Guild apprenticeship . . ." (10). The exchange of ideas that occurs within such models does more to shape a student's mind than checking off competencies. Reading and analyzing Nabokov may not help students get a job but will almost certainly transform them, making them better people and more critical thinkers about the nature of language.

In his lead essay, Larry Andrews rightly points out the value of careful reading that is crucial to honors and the humanities:

A hallmark of honors education is that students experience primary materials of study, reading original texts in all sorts of fields. Both humanities and honors value not only high levels of reading skill but thoughtful responses to texts and an ability to integrate them into broader knowledge, reaching toward not just learning but wisdom.

Like Austin, Andrews makes the crucial point that the path to wisdom is what we are staking out in honors education. This path does not cancel out a competency-based education but should allow for an errancy, a wandering into thought. Andrews concludes, "Both honors and the humanities nurture a tolerance for ambiguity and a recognition of complexity and context." If we continue on our current business-model path, we will eventually arrive at a

system that is not only devoid of wisdom or the capacity to achieve it but that dismisses its importance. Waiting to meet us at the gates of this educational model will be the ghost of Mr. Gradgrind.

With the value of wisdom foremost in our minds, honors can be a celebration of the imagination and of what it means to be human. We can achieve this value in collaboration with other STEM-based disciplines by cultivating an omnivorous quest or, as Andrews phrases it, "an endless appetite for exploration." Honors students have the best chance at becoming critical and thoughtful citizens in the contemporary world precisely because honors allows them to learn through close reading and rigorous discussion in an interdisciplinary milieu that draws on a wide range of institutional resources.

In *The Educated Imagination*, Northrop Frye makes the following declaration: "The fundamental job of the imagination in ordinary life, then, is to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in" (140). The essential task of educators is to cultivate the imagination in profound ways that travel far beyond that of simple job training. While higher education should provide skills that will be useful in the workplace, it should not sacrifice careful study in the humanities and thus foreclose on the future of democracy. If the United States is to compete with the rest of the world in education, then we must move beyond the mentality of education as only a means to a better job. We get the society we deserve, and, if we have a society filled with nothing more than skilled workers and middle-managers, then no one will be able to lead us into the future in meaningful and thought-provoking ways.

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