

<http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i23/23b00701.htm>

A Manifesto for the Humanities in a Technological Age

By CATHY N. DAVIDSON and DAVID THEO GOLDBERG

In a 2002 interview, the so-called global economic adviser Jeffrey D. Sachs insisted that interdisciplinarity was the only way to solve world problems. The need, he said, was "to focus not on the disciplines but on the problems and to bring together five main areas in an intensive dialogue: the earth sciences, ecological science, engineering, public health, and the social sciences with a heavy dose of economics." What was missing, of course, were the humanities and the historical, comparative, and critical analyses the humanities provide.

Sachs is not alone in his disregard. Few observers of higher education would deny that support for the humanities is declining in an environment in which universities are increasingly ordered according to the material interests, conditions, and designs of the sciences, technology, and the professions. We contend, however, that if ever there were a time when society was in need of humanistic modes of inquiry, it is today. More than ever, we require the deep historical perspective and specialized knowledge of other cultures, regions, religions, and traditions provided by the humanities. And precisely because of the rapid developments in science and technology, we must think carefully about the nature of the human, the ethics of scientific investigation, and the global effects of technological change. Those questions -- the province of the humanities -- are vital and need to be recognized as such by universities, by society at large, and, we admonish, by humanists themselves.

To this end, we pose three fundamental questions: Is there a place for the humanities in the contemporary university? If so, what place? And what kind of humanities?

As scholars with experience as directors of two interdisciplinary humanities institutes -- one on the West Coast and one on the East Coast, one at a public-university system and one at a private university -- we offer the following manifesto for the humanities. We note that we define the humanities as our institutes have, in a way resonant with Sachs's prescription: as problem- or issue-based rather than disciplinary, and collaborative rather than individualistic in their model for research and thinking.

Further, our manifesto is both normative and descriptive. It is normative in the sense that we see it as a prescription for the kind of humanities best suited to the contemporary university and its global arrangements. It is descriptive in that we believe that the humanities have already gone through some of the intellectual transformations we describe, but that universities and humanists themselves have not yet fully appreciated the magnitude or the implications of the change.

Although humanists, for example, often engage in multiauthor, multidisciplinary projects (such as collaborative histories, anthologies, and encyclopedias) with the potential to change fields, universities and their faculties have been slow to conceive of new institutional structures and reward systems (tenure, promotion, etc.) for those who favor interdisciplinary or collaborative work. We believe that a new configuration in the humanities must be championed to ensure their centrality to all intellectual enterprises in the university and, more generally, to understanding the human condition and thereby improving it; and that those intellectual changes must be supported by new institutional structures and

values.

Over the last two decades, the humanities have been reconfigured both across departmental divides and within those entities called "traditional humanities departments." The work being done in those departments -- the syllabi in undergraduate courses, the reading lists doctoral students prepare, the books their professors write -- are already marked by a disciplinary heterogeneity that would have been almost unrecognizable as pertinent to any specific disciplinary thinking a generation ago. Humanities departments have been transformed in many different directions, with many different emphases, but all show the marks of such crosscutting interdisciplinary areas as ethnic studies, gender studies, cultural studies, and new kinds of area studies or global studies; critical theory has broadened the base of reading into philosophy, sociology, ethnography, anthropology, and political and social theory. Concomitantly, those areas of social science often called "narrative" or "interpretive" ("soft science," in a phrase we deplore) have adopted literary theory and methods of narrative and subjective, memoiristic writing. Performance theory has (at long last) broken down the barrier between humanistic writing about the arts and actual artistic production (creative writing, dance, music, visual arts, performance art, multimedia art). Science studies, critical legal theory, and science-and-information studies are all within the province of humanistic study. Service-learning models have further extended the reach of the humanities and the arts into the larger community, through speaker series, book clubs, outreach programs, as well as "in reach" programs where community leaders educate academics about their ideas and practices.

We are not *proposing* such changes. Look around! While some were busy fighting the culture wars, a different battle across disciplinary lines was being fought -- and it was won. The humanities in 2004 are a many-splendored thing.

Take, for example, the remarkable excitement in areas such as classics. The melding of traditional linguistic and historical areas (such as epigraphy or papyrology) with new techniques of 3-D digital imaging and visualization, coupled with an expansive political geography that acknowledges that the ancient world extended across Asia and Africa as well as over what is now known as Europe, has changed the map of antiquity. "Postcolonial classics" may seem like an oxymoron, but some of the most exciting work in classical studies has been carried out by archaeologists who have read contemporary theories about the economic, political, and psychic impact of colonization and of war or revolution against a former colonizer. Critical race theory and gender studies have added new contours to our understanding of the past as well. Humanists delving into the contentious issue of paying reparations to descendants of African-American slaves, for example, have been talking to classicists to sketch out a deep and complex portrait of slavery and the impact of racism in societies that stretch from centuries past to the United States today. Each field is richer and deeper because of the others.

The important point here (and it can be extended to medieval and Renaissance studies, too) is that the influence is multidirectional. We are not talking about making older fields "relevant" (the rallying cry of humanists in the late 1960s). We are saying that new interdisciplinary paradigms help us uncover whole new areas and objects of study that, in turn, complicate the paradigms. Rather than denounce some of this work as "present-ist," humanists need to embrace the complications of interdisciplinarity. Those outside the humanities should draw on the humanities as they do the same.

In some core sense, however, humanists do not receive credit for the contributions they make in the same way that, for example, scientists receive credit for discovering a way to prevent or treat a formerly incurable disease or social scientists are quoted as authorities on current events. While a relatively minor scientific discovery (sometimes even one based on a study not yet replicated) can become a headline in the media at large as well as on our university Web sites, the form of knowledge offered by humanists is less frequently viewed in terms of "discovery." Insight, analysis, logic, speculation, historical knowledge, linguistic mastery, geographical precision, aesthetic production, or complex religious

understanding are somehow not "new" -- even when they are.

Yet when university administrators make the case for the importance of higher education to legislators or potential donors, they often summon up a humanities-based concept of general education -- even when they do not acknowledge it as such. They typically argue that a four-year degree, with a liberal-arts foundation, provides a better launching pad to responsible citizenship in an uncertain world than, for example, specialized acquisition of skills in a trade school.

We need to bring to the surface for our administrators, and our university public-relations officers, how much the distinctive underpinning of the modern research university (as well as of the liberal-arts college) is the humanities. If all we want is expertise, industry is a far better place to learn science and technology than a university. But, in fact, industry, more than anyplace else, wants not only highly trained scientists; it wants scientists who can also understand applications, intellectual property, issues of equity, human awareness, perspective, and other forms of critical analysis and logical thinking that are specifically the contribution of humanistic inquiry. The university that loses its foundation in the humanities loses, in effect, its most important asset in making the argument that "education" and not "vocational training" is worth the support of taxpayers, foundations, and private donors.

The humanities engage three broad sets of questions: those of meaning, value, and significance. *Meaning* concerns interpretation of data, evidence, and texts. *Value* ranges over the entire field of cultural, aesthetic, social, and scientific investments. *Significance*, implicating both the former two, raises questions of representation, in the sense of accounting for (explanation) and of capturing, in the sense both of offering a faithful rendition (description) and of making broad claims (generalization).

This way of thinking links the humanities, old and new, engaging the best of both, yoking traditional humanities interests -- interpretation and questions of value (ethics, aesthetics) -- to newer ones such as a critical and reflexive focus on representation, on the latter's conditions of expression, signification, and power. It prompts the following characterizations of the humanities:

* History matters. The humanities at once reflect and depend upon historical scholarship. This point is deeply tied to the antifoundationalist disposition in today's humanities, with its skepticism of grand universals. The focus must be on the specific context. That is true as much in the histories of the formation of knowledge, of disciplines and their limits, as it is in particular subject matters -- the objects of analysis -- with which we now concern ourselves. We cannot fully comprehend any object of analysis, like the AIDS catastrophe in Africa, without understanding the historical conditions of its emergence, modes of being, and representation.

* Relationality reveals. The relational view -- socially, conceptually, historically -- that the humanities bring to the table provides insights and perspectives not otherwise available. For example, a catchphrase like "American women have more freedom than any other women in the world" cries out for a greater understanding of different conceptions of being a woman. Why are rape rates in some countries significantly lower than in the United States? Why do numerous countries where women seem to have few rights still have female leaders? The point is not to dismiss the idea that American women enjoy freedom, but to comprehend what it means. To do that requires an understanding of particulars -- and of global connections and comparisons.

* Conscience and critical memory trouble. The humanities serve as the conscience and memory of intellectual and social life, and of the academy itself. Did the universities in Germany heroically oppose the rise of fascism, weakly collaborate, or some of both? When have scientists acted, and not acted, in the best interests of society? We learn the lessons of history, but we do not always enjoy them. The humanities both reflect the world and its representations, and serve to reflect critically upon them. What

a burden to bear! No wonder we're not always welcome at the dinner table in this day and age. No longer are we only (if we ever were) the entertainers of the court.

* Creativity counts. The humanities and the arts are vital to one another, coterminous and codependent. They support, shape, and inspire each other. After all, both are concerned with representation, with signification and interpretation, with value and evaluation, as well as with the conditions that make those things possible. Both are based on assumptions that there are multiple forms of intelligence. The relationship of the humanities to the arts, however, cannot be simply subject and object (the aesthetic production as an object of study by humanists). Artists have traditions of expression, voice, and performativity from which those of us in the humanities have much to learn. The very highest standard of collaboration, for example, is what dance troupes, actors, and musicians do as a matter of course: combine an array of individual talents into a whole. Although artists and humanists often compete for the same restricted funds, by insisting on the interconnections among our endeavors -- and by acknowledging that those trained in expressive cultural forms may be better communicators of certain messages than humanists -- we can shape intellectual projects that widen the scope, audience, and importance of our intertwined endeavors.

* Social policy contains social assumptions and values. The humanities, social in character even if all too readily hermetic in practice, can help delineate the assumptions and values in social arrangements. Global health policy, for instance, must take into account the social hierarchies, cultural practices, belief systems, histories and relations among subgroups (ethnic, religious, racial, sexual, etc.) to be effective. Without deep knowledge of culture, language, and history, public policy is doomed to fail. No social policy ought to be conceived, let alone enacted, without humanities infusion.

* Communication clarifies. If we in the humanities are to insist upon the privilege of informing critical policy making, we must promote dialogue in clear and concise ways. We bring -- or surely can bring -- to the table interpretive and critical skills: an ability to analyze formal structures; to reveal hermeneutic content; to highlight critical values. But, in renewing the public contributions of the humanities, we need to find the language to generalize from our specialized training without compromising the critical and interpretative values for which we stand.

* Diversity is important. The humanities have been the principal (and for the most part the principled) site of diversity and diversification in the academy, both demographically and intellectually. Engineering, the sciences, the social sciences, and, to a lesser extent, the business schools now may be playing catch-up, recruiting increasingly diverse student and faculty populations; but the humanities are still way ahead in facing up to the challenge of understanding diversity in complex and paradigm-changing ways (just consider the contributions of ethnic studies, gender and sexuality studies, and other identity-based programs).

* Linguistic diversity is essential to real heterogeneity. More than other areas, the humanities have remained committed to promoting the speaking and reading of languages other than English. Indeed, the language requirement, where it remains for the humanities, is part of the reason we have lost students to the social sciences, where they are happy to speak in a single tongue -- and where students in area studies are happily sent to the humanities to learn the foreign language of an area of specialization. But the elevation of English as the global lingua franca of commerce has placed enormous pressure on the continuing viability of language programs.

We conclude with three points, two institutional and one social. The first concerns the humanities and new technologies. The humanities have a central place in exploring the possibilities, the reach and implications, of digital technologies and cultures: how technology shapes what we think about the human and the humane. But there are myriad questions. What do we in the humanities want from those

technologies? What do we want them to contribute to our collective needs and interests, scholarship and pedagogical practices, so that we are not merely passive consumers or after-the-fact commentators? How can we count (for tenure or promotion) work that scholars do in a new digital environment and that will quickly outstrip the work they publish on paper? How do we best employ new technologies (which our students often find less intrusive than we seem to) for pedagogical purposes? Most important, how can humanistic training (taxonomical, philosophical, indexical) be used to solve one of the biggest problems of the information age: How do we make sense of too much information? Humanistic thinking is ideally suited to creating next-generation, multimedia search engines that also order, sort, and minimize information flow. Doing so is not a matter of hardware or software but of collective thinking and analysis.

The second institutional point is that new humanities require new structures. As we think through the revolution in electronic communication, we need to create new models for researchers to work across disciplinary boundaries, making use of databases and resources that no one scholar, or department, can maintain. That requires planning at an institutional level. We need, too, to stop talking around the issue of the single-author monograph as the benchmark for excellence, and to confront what new kinds of collaboration mean for tenure review, accreditation, and more.

That brings us to our third point. We live in challenging times, and if we don't mind our manor (not to mention our manners), we will find our intellectual and pedagogical environments drastically changed without our more or less consciously shaping them. We have much to offer, and we need to be assertive in defining our contribution, labeling it, and getting our message heard.

The humanities provide the social and cultural contexts of the creation and application of knowledge, the critical reflections upon how knowledge is created and what its effects and implications are. The humanities promote a broad range of social and cultural literacies. They offer critical civic competencies, ways of comprehending cultural and technological values, and the worlds such values conjure; in short, ways of world making. A world without the humanities would be one in which science and technology knew no point of social reference, had lost their cultural compass and moral scope. It would be a world narrowly limited and limitlessly narrow.

It is true that being "above the radar screen" has a certain social risk but far less of a risk than being peripheralized, marginalized, underfinanced, and out of the collective decision making at our universities or in the society beyond. The university remains one of the only places in our public sphere for informed, sustained, critical analysis. The humanities represent that practice and that form. We must face the challenge and assume the social responsibility of translating our specialized knowledge in ways that might inform the public, contribute to policy discussions, and, in the process, show students, faculty members, university administrators, and state legislators the importance of the humanities.

Cathy N. Davidson is vice provost for interdisciplinary studies and a professor of English at Duke University. David Theo Goldberg is director of the University of California Humanities Research Institute and a professor of African-American studies and of criminology, law, and society at the University of California at Irvine.

<http://chronicle.com>
Section: The Chronicle Review
Volume 50, Issue 23, Page B7

[Front page](#) | [Career Network](#) | [Search](#) | [Site map](#) | [Help](#)

[Copyright](#) © 2004 by The Chronicle of Higher Education

