

# Mapping the future: Reports tackle issues, concerns involving strengthening the humanities in a scientific age

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A panel of experts met in early May for “The Humanities and the Future of the University.” Convened by the Mahindra Humanities Center and funded by the Office of the President, the discussion explored ways of reviving interest in the reflexive and analytical disciplines that make up humanistic study. Credit: Rose Lincoln/Harvard Staff Photographer

After 18 months of quiet effort, a committee of scholars from within the

Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) released a set of three reports this week on teaching the arts and humanities at Harvard College. The lengthiest one, "Mapping the Future," is a 70-page analysis of what the trends are, what the stakes are, and what steps the future requires.

In sum, the trend is downward for undergraduates concentrating in the arts and [humanities](#). The stakes are high for beleaguered departments. And the action steps are plain: more attention to freshmen exploring concentrations, broader courses, and more cross-discipline collaboration.

"We really want to be present," said Arts and Humanities Dean Diana Sorensen, "not just as a signpost but as a practice."

The three reports were inspired in early 2012 by a request from Sorensen. The first, "Mapping the Future," focused on the philosophical underpinnings of the humanities, its present state at Harvard College, and its [aspirations](#). A second, the Curriculum Working Group Mission Statement, took on curricular reform and announced a first step: a series of "gateway" courses to the humanities to be offered in the fall. A third report, "Addendum," characterized the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard as an intellectual crossroads, a place where the integrative spirit of the humanities is already playing out (though largely for faculty, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students). Its author was Center Director Homi K. Bhabha, Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities, who called for gateway courses that "audaciously cross disciplinary [hubs](#)" at Harvard.

## **An ongoing divisional initiative**

The report is the first product of what will be an ongoing divisional initiative, what Sorensen calls the Humanities Project. At Harvard College, the goal is to make the humanities more vitally collaborative across disciplines, she said. "We show what we're good for."

"We live in a world where social media has allowed everyone to be an interpreter and commentator. Ideas are the currency of today and tomorrow—in every discipline and industry—and powerful, persuasive arguments are what hold the day," said FAS Dean Michael D. Smith. "The humanistic competencies of communication, interpretation, and argument are more relevant and more widely practiced than ever. A Harvard College education must provide our students with the ability to interpret ideas, regardless of discipline, in order to prepare them for the world they will enter."

The humanities commonly include literature, philosophy, the classics, film studies, art history, music, and religious studies. History is traditionally included, though Harvard groups that with the social sciences. By way of a definition, the humanities "emphasize the importance of linguistic training," said Bhabha, "and the powers of communication through argument, interpretation, and discussion."

Bhabha was one of three co-chairs of "Mapping the Future," which combined statistics, philosophy, historical context, and aspirations. Joining him were Sean Kelly, professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy, and James Simpson, the Donald P. and Katherine B. Loker Professor of English.

All three reports come at a time when the culture at large seems to be considering the utility of a branch of learning whose mission is to describe, evaluate, imagine, and reimagine the human experience. The report acknowledges what some analysts might call a moment of cultural doubt in these beleaguered disciplines, but it also states its biggest goal: the "collective assertion of the humanities as an essential foundational element in American liberal arts education."

After studying data that goes back decades, "Mapping the Future" acknowledged that art and philosophy are "where the meanings are," but

increasingly where the undergraduates are not.

Since 1966, the number of humanities bachelor's degrees awarded nationally has slipped from 14 to 7 percent. At Harvard College, the percentage of humanities concentrators has fallen from 24 to 17 percent since 1954. If you count history (not officially regarded as a humanities concentration at Harvard), the six-decade decline is even steeper: from 36 to 20 percent.

Among arriving freshmen in the Class of 2006, 27 percent said they would concentrate in the humanities. When the Class of 2016 arrived, the number of would-be humanities concentrators had sagged to 18 percent.

In a way, it gets worse, said Simpson, whose literary specialties are medieval and Renaissance English, but who appreciates the power of data. Within three semesters, he said, 57 percent of that 18 percent surrender their plans to study the humanities. More than half move over to the social sciences, chiefly to government, psychology, and economics.

That's the darkest data point, said Simpson, but it's offset by a brighter one: Arts and humanities concentrators have the highest levels of satisfaction within the College, and the highest levels of adherence. Once in a concentration, they stay. "We don't have a crisis here," he said. "We have a tremendous opportunity, and we have a challenge."

The task is clear, said Simpson. "We should be focusing on freshmen."

## **Lessons and action**

"Mapping the Future" lists action points, and the ones highest on it refer to the youngest students. The report called on the College to:

- Develop resources for that "freshman-year challenge," including a strong humanities component during Visitas and freshman orientation.
- Open an arts and humanities version of i-lab.
- Found a student group modeled on the Institute of Politics at the Harvard Kennedy School (that is, a student-run venue to host visits by top practitioners).
- Create more art and exhibition spaces.
- Get multiyear funding for internships that allow undergraduates to experience an arts career firsthand.
- Investigate more cross-School courses and co-teaching.
- Fund new faculty positions.

If an institution beyond Harvard wants to adopt these action points, it is welcome to do so. But Simpson and others were explicit: The report is intended for Harvard College alone. Widen the intended audience, said Bhabha, "and you start speaking from 36,000 feet. You become sovereign and imperial. All learning should be on the ground and not in the air."

The report identified other Harvard College imperatives that rise out of the data. Among them:

- Arrest and reverse the decline in humanities concentrators.
- Focus efforts on the first three semesters of study.
- Continue providing "demonstrably excellent undergraduate teaching," as measured by satisfaction levels.
- Reaffirm that Harvard's critical tradition of undergraduate teaching is general and interdisciplinary.
- Expand ways of collaborating with the social sciences and with other Schools.
- Emphasize that the humanities represent solid launching pads into professional schools.

National statistics bear out the findings. Professional schools such as law and medicine admit humanities majors at similar, and sometimes higher, rates as any other branch of study.

The humanities produce graduates who go into a surprising range of careers. Kelly mentioned a few students who graduated with degrees in philosophy. They are lawyers and journalists now, he said, along with comedy writers and graduate students. To illustrate the intellectual diaspora, starting next semester, he added, "We are very interested in bringing alumni back" to tell their stories.

Sorensen had the same vision. "The arts and humanities give you all the tools for all the other jobs you will have," she said. "We see them as creating habits of mind that stand you in good stead—no matter what for."

## **New curricular directions**

The Curriculum Working Group was co-chaired by Julie Buckler, professor of Slavic languages and literatures, and department chair, and Shigehisa Kuriyama, Reischauer Institute Professor of Cultural History and chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations.

Citing the "profound and direct relevance" of the humanities to undergraduates, the working group acknowledged that the focus must be on Harvard College, and in particular on those first three semesters of study. It recommended creating more curricular and extra-curricular pathways into the humanities that could attract concentrators from every field of study. That requires expanding outreach to freshmen. And it requires expanding advising programs.

Creating new pathways would also involve renewed attention to the Freshman Seminar Program. That means encouraging faculty to offer

such courses, especially ones that involve compellingly fundamental themes like time, justice, love, or happiness. Eventually, Freshman Seminars might cluster around a common theme, opening the way to joint activities or meetings.

The first official curricular step in the Humanities Project will be a series of gateway courses in 2013-2014: intentional, focused invitations to experience the arts and humanities. These humanities framework courses reflect three directions for learning: the art of listening, the art of reading, and the art of looking. "These square with the recommendations," said Simpson of his committee, for "courses that offer freshmen a clear pathway to the humanities."

Some of these courses might count toward concentration credit, a step that the working group called "accreditation."

By 2014-15, gateway courses may be gathered into a proposed sequence, Humanities 1 and Humanities 2.

Starting this fall, the working group also proposed creating an arts and humanities section in the undergraduate course offerings, along with an enhanced navigation tool that makes it easier to find courses thematically. The group proposed junior and senior seminars to bridge the arts and humanities disciplines with all the others. This echoes a subtext with the Humanities Project, to build community.

The curriculum group also looked beyond 2014-15. It envisions eventual course clusters that explore a single theme or problem, creating a "mini-culture" of students focused on a common issue. The future could also bring a humanities secondary field designed for concentrators from other divisions. Eventually, curricular reform could even mean piloting an interdisciplinary humanities concentration, a rigorous program of individual study modeled on the current idea of special concentrations.



Other initiatives are still just being talked about, said Sorensen. One might examine "the city and the humanities," in a partnership involving the arts, humanities, and disciplines at the Graduate School of Design (GSD). (Another subtext of the report involves more interplay between graduate and undergraduate students.)

A new secondary field is being discussed, too, the public humanities, which would illuminate the role of culture in statesmanship. "The arts and humanities create a sense of civic virtue," said Sorensen.

## **The hostile arguments**

"Mapping the Future" includes imperatives arising from decades of data. It outlines a complex action plan looking ahead a decade or more. But it also acknowledges the challenges the humanities face. Chief among these are the "hostile arguments" that exist most powerfully in the corridors of political power, in the thinking of skeptical parents, and in the minds of college graduates saddled with record school debt.

Here is a sharp taste of these arguments:

The "economic argument" comes from a shift in the sense of what universities are for, a movement that began following World War II. "Knowledge of the humanities," the argument goes, "is no practical response to the most pressing practical challenges we face."

The "cultural and social arguments" hold that art and literature are no longer tools for nation building, as they were once explicitly in France and Russia, and more mutedly in the United States. The humanities are now a "low-level factor" on that plane, the report said. Instead of building nations, the argument goes, the humanities "offer us private understanding, pleasure, and consolation."



The "scientific argument" perhaps looms largest in the public imagination. It holds that the sciences and the social sciences do not pretend to create universal truths. But they seem to create knowledge based on quantifiable experiments—a comforting thought to a public hungry for certainty. The knowledge produced by the humanities, said the report's authors, "looks soft by comparison, forever relative, forever a matter of mere interpretation."

The "vocational argument," common during debates at American kitchen tables, avers that humanities departments "are failing in the vocational marketplace" and that declining enrollments are proof of that. To paraphrase the line of argument as explained in the report: To be successful, a university discipline studies money, attracts money through research, and promises graduates a lot of money in future income.

Finally there is the "technological argument." For centuries, societies throughout the world have understood themselves by way of immersion in their cultural art forms: hours at a loom or a potter's wheel; nights of tales told by firelight; endless days sunk into worlds created by the printed word.

However, the report said, "Deep immersion is no longer the order of the technological day. New technologies disfavor the long march of narrative, just as they mitigate against sustained imaginative engagement." In the humanities, the report said, studies of "the high arts" may give way to "media studies." The authors cited an article that recommends a radical strategy for the American humanities. It was subtitled, "Blow them up and start again."

## **Origins that matter**

"Mapping the Future" is not about to recommend blowing up a centuries-old humanities tradition that still resonates with universal truths. The

authors simply recommend bringing traditions into the 21st century in a way that speaks to modern concerns.

"We are in the present ourselves," said Simpson of humanistic scholars. "But that which has been recovered from the past can help with answers of the present."

The sciences discover knowledge, and the humanities recover knowledge, he said. The humanities can address problems that may seem modern but that people have confronted again and again, from monarchy to feminism to ecological decline. "The humanities almost always tell us the same thing, that there is nothing new under the sun," said Simpson, and the field's "long stories" can be a comfort and a guide. "We understand [problems] better by having access to that deep archive."

The humanities also inform governance, said Bhabha. "To be a citizen, you require a great deal of cultural literacy. It's the humanities that supply it."

Along with the other authors of the report, Bhabha values and honors the work of the sciences. "Experimentation is hugely important," he said, but it is best leavened with "humanistic interpretation. There is something about [experimentation] that allows itself to close half an eye to human values in the name of discovery."

There is also something appealing about the lack of stasis suggested by the humanities, said Kelly, since "they're unlike a certain geometrical system, where you get a clear answer that is correct for all time." If your learning is girded with philosophy, literature, and the other arts, he said, "We have a future that in some ways is always up for interpretation."

The humanities bring values into interpretations of the world, as well as a shifting, flexible sensibility that matches changing mores. They also

bring the gift of expression, said Bhabha, "the very act of literacy—teaching people to read, to express themselves, to argue, and to transfer their own ideas."

## **"Transferable competencies"**

In its first pages, "Mapping the Future" outlines what Simpson called the "transferable competencies," the tools provided by the [arts and humanities](#) to describe experience, to evaluate it, to imagine it, and then to transform it.

The tools of description have resulted in a long list of established adjectives that are still useful in grappling with the complexity of the human experience. Life can be "tragic" or "comic." The world can be "sublime" or "harmonious." It can be described in ways that are "elegiac" or "satiric."

The tools of evaluation are required for the act of criticism, a central practice of the humanities. This "rigorous, receptive responsiveness to art and philosophy," the report said, "provokes ... an answering responsibility to the world." Evaluation denies that the business of the humanities is precious and private. It provides a critical framework for judging the world.

Then there are the tools of imagining and transforming the world at large. "Just as the engineer makes life-transforming models," the report said of the humanities, so too the artist and scholar help to "imagine the remaking of an always recalcitrant world."

Besides outlining the tools that remain unchanged, "Mapping the Future" goes back in history to origins that matter, to the landscape of what the humanities once were and how they adapted in response to a changing world.

During the Middle Ages, in the few universities that existed, there were seven liberal arts: the trivium ("three ways") of grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the quadrivium ("four ways") of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. All seven were in service of philosophy, "the master discipline," which was later conflated with theology. (Poetry was excluded from the liberal arts, dismissed as "a fiction with no bearing on the truth.")

Later in the Middle Ages came the *studia humanitatis*, which resembled the modern humanities. Its chief practices were rhetoric, philology, and history—separate from theology (and later from science). With this new order came a radical idea: To understand the past, you have to recover original texts, the *ad fontes*, whose rigorous parsing is central to humanities scholarship to this day.

In the 15th century came another radical idea, that the humanities were not just scholarly, but were prompts to civic action. The practice of "rhetoric"—structuring arguments for persuasion, often in oratory—was thought to underlay good government. During the Renaissance, the humanities added the idea that art-making "was an intellectual as well as a manual activity," according to the report's authors. In turn, the classics encouraged the idea that both texts and archaeological artifacts could illuminate the human experience.

In the mid-19th century, the humanities began to acquire a modern cast because the disciplines became secular. Modern hermeneutics (textual interpretation) started with Bible criticism, but even the Bible was eventually viewed as a historical document rather than a divine one.

Today, the humanities contain three traditions, each in tension with the others: disinterested scholarship, practical skills (such as rhetoric), and enlightened civic action. At the same time, the humanities are in tension with the modern world because the claims of liberality seem counter to

the way the world works. We are, say the humanities, free from the pressures of economic survival, free from vested interests in producing knowledge, and free from ideological (or religious) pre-judgments.

Of course, said "Mapping the Future," the humanities are "motivated one way or another by the needs of now. But a liberal education is not determined by those pressures. It stands back from, and adjacent to, such pressures, reaches deeper, and looks ... from a longer, more disinterested perspective."

The modern humanities are "dangerous" too, the report said in a section authored by Kelly, the philosophy professor. Rhetoric can persuade in ways that overturn convention; criticism may challenge authority. To some, this may fuel another argument against the humanities. After all, this branch of study hews to what is perhaps a culturally threatening task, the report states: "to unmask the operations of power."

The humanities have this critical strain, he said, which represents "the power and the danger" of shaking up what may seem the verities in a given era. But they are also "preservational," said Kelly, a means of conserving common practices "that have value and are being lost."

In the end, the humanities represent "a potentially perilous pursuit," the report says. "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."

Changes in cultural mores will occur again, just as slavery was overturned and the disenfranchisement of women was discredited. When debates flare up during the next major period of change, the humanities need to be there as a moral compass, "Mapping the Future" said. "The domains they characterize [are the] domains of freedom and justice, of reason and goodness, of beauty and right and perhaps even of truth."

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