

## HOW WE TALK ABOUT THE HUMANITIES

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### Faculty Lunch Forum (February 1, 12-1pm, 337 Bachelor Hall)

I have had numerous conversations, formal and informal, with colleagues across the university about the current changes happening to the humanities at Miami. I have started to realize that most of these colleagues politely avoid the fact that they don't know exactly what I mean when I talk about the humanities or the value of the humanities. One psychology professor recently told me this directly, and it felt like a friend telling me I had food in my teeth. It was a well-intended suggestion that something was off, and I wasn't communicating what I thought I was.

This wasn't the first time I noticed that something was amiss. I recently watched a short film produced by an MJF student about the state of the humanities at Miami, and it made it depressingly clear to me that students don't know what we mean when we talk about the humanities either. One section of the film unfolds, tragically, like a late-night comedy show sketch. Students are stopped in the Armstrong Student Center and are asked, "What are the humanities?" "Have you taken a humanities class at Miami?" They answered, "I'm in arts management. Is that in the humanities?" "Psychology?" "Ummmmm..."how

It is partially a problem of perspective—how can a way of thinking that is so fundamentally engrained in how I approach my life not be as instinctual to others? I struggle to define the humanities, I think, because I'm too close to it. But if I struggle to define and communicate what the humanities are in a compelling way, how can I expect our non-humanities colleagues to help? How can I expect advisors and admissions officers to tell students why they should study the humanities? How can we help students articulate why they study the humanities and why they are important to higher education?

As we advocate for the role of the humanities at Miami, I grow increasingly worried that we have skipped a step. We need to go back and clearly define what it is we're advocating for. I have heard answers that gesture to the consistency of the humanities in history. (*Aristotle defined it as...*) I have also heard answers that fall back on the good ol' fashioned fundamentals of education. (*Reading, writing, 'rithmetic.*) But neither of these kinds of answers do justice to the amazing work of humanities faculty. And they do not speak to what the humanities can offer a student in the twenty-first century. But maybe most importantly, these answers don't speak about the humanities on a local level. What are the humanities at Miami?

That friendly psychology professor suggested that it might be helpful to create a resource that everyone at the university could turn to for a clear and basic explanation of what disciplines are considered part of the humanities, what questions or methodologies bind those disciplines, and what the value of the humanities is (including how it is different or similar to the concept of the liberal arts). I'd like to propose that we spend our time together building something like this—finding clear language that communicates to those outside the humanities what we do and why it is valuable. We might break this down into a 30-second pitch and longer explanations. But perhaps we all need to get better at explaining what is unique about the humanities and why they matter.

Maybe we could [start here](#).