# Are the Benefits of the Humanities a Goal or a Byproduct of Our Curricula?

**Humanities Center Faculty Lunch Forum (April 25, 2024) Ron Becker**

A few assumptions (that we can challenge and complicate as needed):

- Students benefit in many ways from the skills, perspectives, and experiences they encounter in Humanities courses and majors, including in terms of employment success. Such outcomes include: critical thinking, communication, empathy, understanding context, engaging with difference, close reading skills, expanded horizons, etc.

- Liberal Arts colleges have been based on the belief that students can/should gain these important skills and perspectives by majoring in and taking courses from across disciplines like Literature, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Math, etc.  This system has linked the perpetuation of those disciplines to undergraduate education.

- Fewer people (parents, students, employers, trustees, colleagues?) believe in this approach—in the idea that "buying" access to those valuable skills and perspectives by majoring in those traditional disciplines is a wise move.  Exactly what they think and why seems opaque.

    - Some people may not value those liberal-ed outcomes at all.  Some may simply want to buy access to skills that have (ostensibly) more obvious and direct career applications. Some may take them for granted, assuming anyone who goes to college gains them. Some may value them but think they can get them in other (more "relevant-to-them") majors.
    - What data might help us navigate/respond to what is going on?
    - We have been grappling with these trends for more than a decade and have offered up many arguments for the benefits of the Humanities.  Many of these efforts have been focused on shifting the attitudes of our audiences. Those are important efforts, but the gains seem limited and I wonder if placing to much hope in the idea that we can change their minds may be a form pf cruel optimism.

Here, I want to pose some questions that ask us to examine some of our own assumptions and practices.

<span style="color:red">To what extent do Humanities curricula treat the skills/outcomes we tout as valuable to students as **byproducts** of a curriculum where courses and assignments are mostly focused on more disciplinary-focused goals (i.e., training our students to become us in a narrow sense, to go to grad school in our field)?</span>

- To what extent are faculty who teach in the Humanities "primarily" invested in more disciplinary specific knowledge rather than broader outcomes of empathy, critical thinking, understanding contexts, etc.?

- Does our love for what we teach and our socialization into specific disciplines make it harder for us to imagine other ways that those "valuable" outcomes could be taught?
- To what extent is there a sunk-costs or path-dependency dynamic going on? Faculty have deep training in a specific discipline so we (as individuals and as an institution) understandably get trapped in leveraging that disciplinary expertise…as a result, we reproduce the system we were trained in.
- If the "crisis" of liberal arts education is fueled by the dynamics of an increasingly competitive "market"—one in which fewer people are interested in buying access to those valuable skills via traditional disciplines—how can we respond?

<span style="color:#8B0000">**Is it possible to create Humanities curricula in which the broader outcomes are at the center of courses and assignments, and disciplinary goals are "merely" secondary?**</span>

- Is this already happening in some of our Humanities courses and/or curricula?
  - If yes, where? And are there ways to make those efforts more legible/visible?
  - If no, what might doing that look like?

- Are "post-disciplinary" majors basically doing this? The rise of Media Studies may have been an early sign of this trend. More recent examples might include Organizational Leadership and Arts Management. Was Social Justice Studies an attempt at doing this? If so, what lessons can be learned from the relative success/failure of these programs?

<span style="color:#8B0000">**Are there necessary correspondences between our disciplines and the "valued/practical" outcomes?**</span>

- If so, what are they?
- And how can we foreground them in how we communicate what we do?

<span style="color:#8B0000">**What would be lost in an approach that decenters traditional disciplines?**</span>
- If disciplines are de-centered in some way (as is happening for some of our colleagues right now), what new structures could help support the perpetuation of those disciplines?