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THE RISE OF CORPORATE LITERATURE: CRISIS IN THE HUMANITIES I

JEFFREY R. DI LEO, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

How prepared are you to teach a course on “corporate” literature? What would you say to someone who does not recognize the value of a liberal arts education? How would you argue for the value of reading contemporary fiction—to someone who aspires to be an accountant? The ongoing challenges facing the humanities are making these questions more common—and responses to them more significant.

Many believe that the future of the humanities hinges in large part on the ability of people who share a passion for the liberal arts to be able to articulate that passion to others. Seeing and hearing people who are fully committed to their art is often believed the best way of supporting the arts. The poet who intensely and emphatically reads her poetry reveals her commitment to her art; the philosopher who cleverly turns every statement into a question and undermines beliefs demonstrates the perennial and complex nature of philosophy; the novelist who convinces others to believe in her characters and care for their well-being shows the power of mimesis.

However, if there is a “crisis” in the humanities, it may be because these traditional ways of drawing people into the humanities are no longer working. Students facing the prospect of going into debt to attend college are less interested today in studying things that might be good for the mind, but are potentially hard on their wallets—and career aspirations. A generation or two ago, students were more passionate about things like poetry and history. The current generation though is more committed to pursuing lucrative vocational careers than enjoying the wonders of the liberal arts—to relieving their massive student debt than pursuing majors that they believe will only exacerbate their economic woes.

Pollster Daniel Yankelovich has noted that “75 percent of high school seniors and 85 percent of their parents said college is important because it ‘prepares students to get a better job and/or increases their earning potential.’” In itself, the situation would not be so dire for the liberal arts if these students and their parents had some knowledge of—if not appreciation for—the liberal arts. After all, corporate employment aspirations (and success) are not mutually exclusive with an appreciation for the liberal arts. However, according to Yankelovich, “44 percent of students and 19 percent of their parents could not answer the question, What does a liberal arts education mean?” In addition, Yankelovich’s polling indicated that “[t]he overall impression of liberal arts education among 68 percent of the students and 59 percent of the parents was negative or neutral.”

These beliefs about higher education and its value would be challenges for the humanities even in good economic times. However, since the economic meltdown of 2008, they have made the situation in the humanities even worse. The rising cost of higher education and the shrinking job market coupled with prevailing perceptions about the value of a college education have had a decidedly negative impact on the liberal arts.

Some of the more disturbing numbers associated with this negative impact are the decreasing numbers of humanities majors. For example, 40 years ago, 64,286 students received bachelor’s degrees in English. However, in 2007, it was reported that the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded in English had shrunk to 53,040. This drop would not be so significant if one did not also consider that during this period, the total number of bachelor’s degrees almost doubled. Taking this into account, the 64,286 majors in 1971 equates to approximately 128,500 in 2007, thus bringing the weighted decrease in English majors over this span to around 60 percent.

Perhaps a better gauge of the state of the liberal arts though is the number of students who attended liberal arts colleges but did not receive degrees in the liberal arts. In 1987, just over 10 percent of all students attending the 225 liberal arts colleges in the US received degrees in vocational fields, whereas by 2008 that percentage rose to nearly 30 percent. At the lowest tier (or ranked) liberal arts colleges, the percentage is well over 50 percent.

Can the liberal arts get a bigger slap in the face than this? Is there a no clearer indicator of the decreasing value of a liberal arts education than students attending liberal arts colleges but in increasing numbers *not* majoring in the liberal arts? In the same way that a drastic increase of business majors at colleges dedicated to the arts would not be a good sign for the arts, so too are increasing numbers of vocational majors at colleges dedicated to the liberal arts. One goes to Juilliard to study opera—not operations management; one goes to Williams to study philosophy—not finance.

Vocational aspirations and careerism among students are radically altering liberal arts education in America. The liberal arts curriculum is slowly giving way to vocational—or, if you will, *corporate*—instruction. If something is not done about this soon by critically engaged academics, there is every reason to believe that the move toward more vocational courses and majors will accelerate—and that the liberal arts curriculum that remains will increasingly be tailored to serve the needs of an increasingly vocationally and corporately minded student base. In this climate, it would not be unexpected to see the literature curriculum detached from its aesthetic and critical foundations, and repositioned on a corporate or vocational base—particularly if it wants to survive in the neoliberal university (or universe). How then do we as educators meet the demands of vocationally motivated undergraduate students *and* resist emptying our liberal arts courses from their historical, political, and critical roots? How do we protect the distinctiveness of the liberal arts, while at the same time persuade vocationally minded students of their significance?

It is my belief that we need to not ignore the desires of our students or to denigrate them, but rather to engage them in a progressive form of dialogue with and through the liberal arts courses that we offer. “Corporatizing” literature courses (or literature in the corporate university) does not mean that we ignore the historical and political dimensions of the works that we are teaching; rather, it means that we need to be careful not to assume that students *prima facie* care about the critical foundations of texts. Teaching corporatized literature courses requires a more complex dialogue between teacher and students in order to respect mutual desires. In the end, however, this respect of different desires may be one of the only ways to prevent the eventual extinction of large swaths of the liberal arts curriculum—especially if our corporate liberal arts courses bring about a greater knowledge of and appreciation for the liberal arts.

Writers and critics need to be concerned with the crisis in the humanities. While some have preferred to react to recent events in the humanities by questioning whether it really is a “crisis” or whether it really is not as bad as it appears, others have written off the crisis as someone else’s problem or lowered their expectations about being able to save the humanities. In the end, though, such responses only serve as convenient “red herrings” for the destructive forces working to bring the humanities down. There will be plenty of time to split philosophical hairs about the “perceived” versus the “real” state of the humanities when the neoliberal arts revert back to being the liberal arts. However, until then, to ignore or write off the problems facing the humanities is to be part of the problem.

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