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Manifesto for the Humanities

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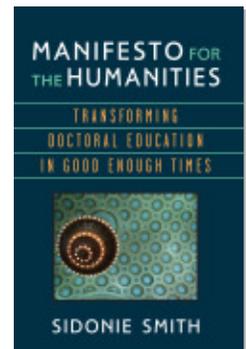
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Introduction

At this historical moment, the challenge facing faculty invested in educating future generations of academic humanists is the conceptualization of a 21st-century doctoral education. It must be an education adequate to the lived realities of the academy now; to the energies of students who make the choice to pursue a doctorate; and to the intellectual, affective, and social attachments that drive the pursuit of excellence in scholarly inquiry and teaching. The imperatives are multiple: to be purposeful in sustaining passionate conviction about the value of advanced study in the disciplines of the humanities; to be flexible in adapting to the shifting environment in which that study will take place; to be strategic in addressing concerns about the high level of attrition, the continuing lack of diversity in the humanities professoriate, and the exploitative conditions of contingency in humanities disciplines; and to be responsive to the diverse aspirations, dispositions, and intellectual interests of those willing to do the time, find the funds, and endure the long haul. This book is a manifesto for meeting the challenge.

This manifesto for a 21st-century doctoral education unfolds in three parts.

Part I advances the mantra that “the times are good enough” to make significant change in how future humanists are educated. As manifestos are designed to do, it surveys particulars related to the current state of higher education in North America, touching on the retreat from commitment to public funding, the din of attacks on the value of a liberal arts education and humanities degrees, and the consolidation of corporatist discourse and practice. Then it proceeds beyond critique, and the nostalgia that feeds a sense of enervation, to suggest why the times are good enough to effect change.

Part II seeks to answer the question, What is the emergent ecology of higher education in which humanities doctoral students will pursue their goals? It explores shifts in the everyday life of academic humanists now—shifts at once quotidian and profound, often troubling and far-reaching. They relate to the evolving concept of the university; the epistemic infrastructure; the new media and modes of scholarly production and communication; the

trend toward the “open”; the reorientation of learning environments; and the emergent profile of a possibly posthuman humanities scholar. A manifesto for the sustainability of the 21st-century humanities follows Part II. The manifesto, detailing an agenda for boldly engaging this new everyday, culminates in the call to transform doctoral education.

Part III presents a 21st-century doctoral education in the humanities, elaborating intellectual grounds for transformation as well as the potential effects of change. It makes the case for breathing life into the dissertation by expanding its possible forms, genres, and compositional modes. It suggests changes related to courses and to coursework. In concert with the initiatives of graduate schools and departments across North America, it emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for doctoral students to gain new skills and competencies increasingly important for humanities scholarship and practice and transferable to other careers graduates might imagine. At its conclusion, it circles around to the issues taken up in Part I by suggesting how a new conceptualization of doctoral education might productively address troubling conditions on the ground.

Manifesto for the Humanities speaks to multiple audiences. It addresses doctoral students, present and prospective. They hear the naysayers and skeptics. They read about the retreat from adequate funding for higher education. They observe and live concerns about student demographics, access and high student debt, corporate discourse and practices. They recognize the undervalued position of the academic humanities in higher education. Part I offers hopeful energy for assessing the current state of the academic humanities and for taking action to map for themselves a doctoral education adequate to the times. The six-part exploration of shifts affecting academic humanities in Part II prepares doctoral students to better understand the current forces affecting the life of professional humanists and the emergent identities and roles through which their life as scholars and teachers in the academy will play out. Again, they know and live parts of this larger story of transformation. Indeed, many of them are out there riding the shifts, if anxious about what is required of them now, and what might be required of them in the future. The manifesto that concludes Part II models one way to integrate an agenda for action with shifting conditions on the ground, even as those conditions continue to morph. In Part III doctoral students gain access to debates taking place in humanities departments across North America broadly, about why, how, and to what ends doctoral education needs to change. Knowledge of the debates, the anxieties, and the possibilities of change, both large and small, prepares them to explore with peers, mentors, and administrators how to move through their program, innovate where innovation is possible, organize for change, and find resources when they are not readily available. At stake here is stu-

dents' agency and preparation for making change in the academy and in their professions.

Manifesto for the Humanities addresses faculty guiding students through this exhilarating and stressful preparation and administrators charged with ensuring student success, setting policy, and directing resources. In the primer on shifts in the everyday life of academic humanists, they will find useful information relevant to questions their students might raise or projects those students might talk of pursuing; and they will recognize the complex vectors of student anxieties, and their own. Attentive to the broad-based conversation about doctoral education in the humanities now taking place across North America and to foundation support for transformational projects, this manifesto situates local initiatives and conversations in a larger framework of national and transnational trends, debates, and experiments. Faculty agnostic about proposed changes and those eager for them will find here a blueprint encompassing transformation large and small, suggesting how to conceptualize coursework, courses, curricula, capstone projects, and professional preparation. Faculty suspicious of change talk might not be convinced by my arguments, but they may find here more "food for thought" to help them assess whether these changes can contribute to their goals for the humanities in the academy. At stake here is the leadership of faculty and faculty administrators in imagining, working for, and evaluating the efficacy of a 21st-century doctoral education.

Manifesto for the Humanities addresses more generally the public, of which both students and faculty, as well as their friends and families, are a part. I want doctoral students to loan this book to mothers and fathers, partners and friends. I want potential employees of those with humanities doctorates to read this book as well, and public policy analysts and sympathetic politicians. My intention is to convey to people outside the academy what pursuing doctoral education in the humanities involves. I'm not arguing with the liberal arts skeptics here; others have been doing that eloquently and urgently. Rather, I am engaging an audience of generalists who are themselves everyday humanists. They care about those loved ones and friends, and they care about the humanities, even if they may never have articulated exactly why. As potential employers or policy analysts, they care about people with a broad range of talents and a disposition for intellectual inquiry, adaptability, and leadership. At stake here is building a broader community of allies who recognize the prodigious talents and skills that people with doctorates in the humanities bring to the table, allies who appreciate what the humanities contribute to the liberal arts, the public sphere, and the economy and why the work of the humanities is central to the examined and pleasurable and intensely engaged life.

