“A step away from complacent knowing”: Reinvigorating democracy through the humanities

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Abstract
“A step away from complacent knowing” argues that the humanities have long been understood as enhancing civic life and human intellectual and moral development. At moments when democratic societies seem at risk, however, such as the birth of the new US Republic, the aftermath of World War II, and in the face of an anemic twenty-first-century American democracy, the humanities have been deployed with special urgency to cultivate democratic values and practices. The 2012 report, A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future, underscores how central the humanities are in such a stratified, diverse, and globally linked world. The report both cited and launched a vibrant creativity within the academy. Civically enriched, student-centered humanities designs illuminate a path for reinvigorating democracy while also rejuvenating the humanities themselves.

Keywords
Campus/community partnerships, democracy, humanities, pluralism, social justice

“Words like ‘freedom,’ ‘justice,’ ‘democracy’ are not common concepts; on the contrary, they are rare. People are not born knowing what these are. It takes enormous and, above all, individual effort to arrive at the respect for other people that these words imply.” James Baldwin (1956)
“As we strive to create a more civil public discourse, a more adaptable and creative workforce, and a more secure nation, the humanities and social sciences are the heart of the matter, the keeper of the republic—a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the ideals we hold in common.” (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013)

Anticipating the final line of their alma mater, “Bright College Years,” Yalies reach into their pockets to remove white handkerchiefs to wave in unison as they sing triumphantly, “For God, for Country, and for Yale.” Though written at the end of the nineteenth century, the lines honor the 1701 charter of Yale University, which explained that the college was to be a place “wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts and Sciences [and] through the blessings of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church and Civic State” (Yale). Humanities, civil society, social cohesion, and careers have been intertwined in American higher education for more than 300 years. But the purpose of the humanities, how they are taught, how often, and to whom has been hotly contested over time—as it is today. Yet at critical historical junctures, when democracy seems at risk, visionary leaders have underscored the power of the humanities as guardians of democracy and a source of its rejuvenation. At each moment, long associated attributes and outcomes of the humanities have been embraced, even as they have been transformed by being put more intentionally in the service of democratic aims. Even with contemporary concerns about their decline, the humanities are proving they can be deployed once more, in new formulations, to rescue a faltering US democracy and educate new generations of students to hold it to its ideals of freedom and justice.

Even as colonial colleges, institutions like Yale served multiple purposes, despite being available to only to a sliver of the white male elite. As the above description of Yale attests, the purpose of education was to advance knowledge, sharpen moral understandings, and cultivate informed, responsible civic leaders for the colonies, situated as they were in a monarchy. Patterned as these colleges were after Cambridge and Oxford Universities in England, the curricula of colonial colleges in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were dominated by humanities subjects: studies of ancient Hebrew, Greek, and Latin texts, logic, rhetoric, ethics, theology, history, and philosophy (Kraus, 1961: 67–68). All of these subjects, along with a bit of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and some natural science, were typical classical studies. Joe W Kraus (1961) argues, “The seventeenth-century courses in logic and ethics were believed sufficient to prepare students for their responsibilities to the state” (p. 74). The state was understood then within its colonial context.

But were such subjects sufficient for preparing students for a democratic republic? Many worried that they were not. As concern for civic life shifted to how to sustain the democratic experiment of the fledging, one-of-a-kind US republic, the humanities were often singled out as especially critical. Democratic aims of education were also more specifically articulated in this period. This shift is
immediately visible after the end of the Revolutionary War in the early efforts to establish public schools for all American citizens. Jefferson proposed to create public schooling in the state of Virginia, in his “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” proposed in 1778, 1780, and after many revisions passed in 1796. The bill argued—using language echoing the Declaration of Independence—that “for promoting publick happiness...those persons...should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens.” In the Congress Land Ordinance of 1787, about schooling in the Northwest Territories, The Avalon Project records that Article 3 specifically identifies the humanities within liberal education as contributing to the new democracy: “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

World War II and the humanities

At another instructive milestone in the nation’s history, also born out of a devastating war and an intensified concern about the fragility of democracies, the relationship of the college curriculum, the humanities, and preparation for democratic citizenship was again the center of national discussions. At the close of the World War II era, two significant reports on the subject were published, one by a college and the other by the federal government. The first was Harvard’s General Education in a Free Society in 1945; the second was the Truman Commission’s Higher Education for American Democracy in 1947.

James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard from 1933 to 1953, was the catalyst for what became known as the “Red Book.” Written by the Provost and a faculty committee with an introduction by Conant, it would heavily influence other college curricula around the country. By the 1940s, Harvard students could take a wide range of subjects without much sense of a common core and often bereft of serious immersion in the humanities. Conant (Harvard Committee, 1945) says in his introduction, “There is hardly a university or college in the country which has not had a committee at work in these war years...making drastic revamping of one or more curricula” (v). The United States watched the fall of democracies to fascism occurring in rapid succession all over Europe. There was a heightened concern about how to avert a similar fate. Higher education was one bulwark to turn to. As evidenced by its report, the Harvard committee sought to design a course of study that sharpened democratic values, character, and knowledge. They judged the current curriculum as inadequate.

Among other things, the authors of the Red Book ultimately inserted the humanities as necessary immunization to totalitarian thinking. In his introduction to General Education in a Free Society, Conant explicitly identifies the humanities as providing a necessary part of what he defined as general education that would prepare for responsible democratic citizenship. He explains (Harvard
Committee, 1945) why the humanities, with their strong focus on cultivating “value judgments,” are necessary to education for active democratic citizenship:

“Even a good grounding in math and the physical sciences, combined with an ability to read and write several languages, does not provide a sufficient educational background for citizens of a free nation. For such a program lacks contact with both man’s emotional experience as an individual and his practical experience as a gregarious animal. It includes...no history, no art, no literature, no philosophy. Unless the education process includes at every level of maturity some continuing contact with those fields in which value judgments are of prime importance, it must fall short of the ideal.” (viii, emphasis in the original)

Harvard’s Faculty Committee then recommended establishing a shared general education for all students, whatever their majors, which would include common courses in humanities, social sciences, and science and mathematics. The humanities were distinguished by the way they “explore[d] and exhibit[ed] the realm of value” and of imagination (p. 60). They were the bedrock of the program, as is reflected in the report’s recommendation for a common social science course on American democracy. Imagined as an interdepartmentally conceived course, the authors of the report wanted it to frame the subject through values, history, and philosophy, in the tradition of De Tocqueville’s Democracy in America and Myrdal’s An American Dilemma. Revealing a concern about the state both of American democracy and of a perceived dangerous tilt toward individual rights and advancement rather than the good of the community as a whole, the authors felt it necessary to refine what mid-twentieth-century democracy required. They affirmed the relational and communal dimensions of democracy:

“Democracy is a community of free men...democracy must represent an adjustment between the values of freedom and social living...Rugged individualism is not sufficient to constitute a democracy; democracy also is fraternity and coöperation for the common good.” (pp. 76–77)

What the President and faculty of Harvard wrestled with during the war and just after its cessation, the nation as a whole experienced as numbing shock when they looked squarely at the ravages of World War II. The Marshall Plan was designed to restore shattered economies in Europe. The President’s Commission on Higher Education, on the other hand, took on the task of addressing how higher education could prevent repeating such a devastating world calamity. By the end of World War II, fascism had conquered nearly all of Europe; the crimes against humanity represented particularly by the concentration camps, prison of war camps, and two atomic bombs defied moral systems; and while statistics vary, a minimal estimate of the human cost of the war was a staggering 48 million deaths, over half of whom (27.3 million) were civilians (War Chronicle). Like Jefferson and early members of Congress in the new republic standing shakily on their feet after the War of
Independence ended, members of the Truman Commission sought to be pro-active in defining what education for democracy demanded at such a moment of crisis in human history. They were not satisfied, any more than the writers of Harvard’s Red Book were, that higher education had the curriculum or the democratic vision the nation and the world needed. They called their series of reports *Higher Education for American Democracy*.

In its first volume issued in 1947, *Establishing the Goals*, The President’s Commission on Higher Education emphatically endorsed multiple aims for higher education but made democratic principles and practices central to its core recommendations:

- Education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living.
- Education directly and explicitly for international understanding and cooperation.
- Education for the application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs.

The public purposes of education and the power of the humanities to realize them are integral to all three goals. The first broad sweeping bullet affirms implicitly the importance of philosophy, religion, ethics, literature, and history in particular as they explore what democracy has meant in the past and how, over time, it has been experienced differently depending on racial, religious, and gendered group identities. The imaginative capacity to cross national borders in countries radically different than one’s own and the knowledge and skills of intercultural communication rooted in deep understanding of other cultures are commonplace humanities outcomes needed to develop the global networks of trust named in the second bullet. Finally, the last recommendation—citing “creative imagination”—recalls that deeply valued humanities capacity, as well as the humanities’ power to enhance understandings of societies in all their complex, human-arranged structures.

The President’s Commission on Higher Education (1947) echoed Jefferson’s sentiment when it defined education as a guardian of democracy: “Long ago our people recognized that education for all is not only democracy’s obligation but its necessity. Education is the foundation of democratic liberties. Without an educated citizenry alert to preserve and extend freedom, it would not long endure.” The humanities—with their capacity to refine values and ethics, explore multiple narratives and interpretations, and transport us into other worlds and lives—are recognized in this moment, as they had been at other key junctures of American history, as a cornerstone of education for democratic sensibilities. But the President’s Commission on Higher Education (1947) wanted more than just the humanities involved: “The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all levels and in all its fields of specialization, it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and process.” Like those who acknowledge the deep expertise of English departments in teaching writing while also recognizing that
writing needed to be taught across all disciplines, the Commission saw that the humanities served to cultivate a necessary set of capacities required in education for democratic engagement. But they were not the only set of disciplines responsible.

In the section, “The Need for General Education,” The President’s Commission on Higher Education’s report (1947) echoes the rationale and recommendation of Harvard’s Red Book issued two years earlier. Higher Education for American Democracy says, “Today’s college graduate may have gained technical or professional training in one field of work or another, but is only incidentally, if at all, made ready for performing his duties as a man, a parent, and a citizen.” The curriculum “falls short of that human wholeness and civic conscience which the cooperative activities of citizens require.” While the report never uses the words humanities, the missing outcomes named in the previous sentence are almost fixedly linked to humanities. Another section refers to general education that offers “human orientation and social direction.” That point is reinforced further with allusions to methods and investigations commonly associated with the humanities: “It should enable him to identify, interpret, select, and build into his own life those components of his cultural heritage that contribute richly to understanding and appreciation of the world in which he lives.”

**Contemporary debates and the humanities**

Nearly seven decades later, the Commission’s integration of higher education’s civic and economic mission is being defied. Some who sit in powerful positions in the United States today are working to narrow the expansive and expanding purposes of colleges. With a shriveled vision of what the nation and the world needs, they attack the humanities with special vindictiveness, shoving to the side a long educational tradition in which these fields have served as the very glue that can bind together knowledge, values, and civic agency. In its place jobs and wealth are proposed as the new gold standard.

In Degrees for What Jobs? Raising Expectations for Universities and Colleges in a Global Economy (Sparks and Waits, 2011), for example, the National Governors Association boldly questions the value of a broad liberal education outright. Creating divisions where there should be none, this report poses an alternative aim. It recommends that higher education’s funding should rest on how well it promotes “economic goals,” “workforce preparation,” and “competitive advantage” (p. 3). It proposes linking state funding to the number of graduates in high-paying, high-demand jobs in the state. Proposals have even been floated in Florida to differentiate student tuition according to the salary a graduate earned, which would translate into a business course costing less than a history course on most campuses (Goldberg, 2013). One governor wanted to excise women’s studies from the college curriculum, another anthropology, and still another the phrases “the search for truth” and “improve the human condition” from the University of Wisconsin charter (Kiley, 2013; Strauss, 2015).
Fortunately, there is a countervailing force against such single-minded obsession with jobs as the sole purpose of higher education. Students (Dey et al., 2009) strongly agree that contributing to community should be a major focus of college. In another study (Astin et al., 2007: 5), three-quarters of students assert they are searching for meaning and purpose in life through their college education, and not just for a job. Faculty and student affairs professionals have invested for more than three decades in new curricular and co-curricular pathways that cultivate civic-mindedness. Hundreds of colleges and universities include educating students for social responsibility as one of the four cornerstones of a twenty-first education design (see the “Liberal Education and America’s Promise” initiative at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)).

The general public endorses a similar position. In a 2012–2013 National Issues Forum (NIF) focused on the future of higher education, people who gathered at 115 forums around the country were unabashed in their affirmation of the multiple purposes of education. When they were asked to rank order priorities, preparation for employment was not first. Instead, NIF forum participants endorsed as their highest priority a broad curriculum replete with humanities. In a participant survey published in a report, Divided We Fail: Why It’s Time for a Broader, More Inclusive Conversation on the Future of Higher Education (Johnson and DiStasi, 2014), 56% of respondents strongly agreed that “College should be where students learn to develop the ability to think critically by studying a rich curriculum that includes history, art and literature, government, economics, and philosophy” (p. 28). When the responses “strongly agreed” and “agreed somewhat” are combined, the total comes to 89% (p. 28). This report reiterates the same recognition of the specific values of the humanities in educating for democratic capabilities as do Higher Education for American Democracy and The Heart of the Matter. However, all three also call upon other disciplines to add their own distinctive insights and interpretive lenses on education for democracy. Underscoring their commitment to multiple purposes of higher education, 74% of participants were also strongly and somewhat in favor of the statement that “Colleges and universities should encourage all students to take a diverse range of courses to better understand the world they live in EVEN IF many such courses have little direct bearing on the jobs that will be available when students graduate” (emphasis theirs, p. 31).

**A crucible moment: College learning and democracy’s future**

In the midst of these contending forces, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement released A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future (2012). I had co-directed the project for the AAC&U with Larry Braskamp of Global Perspectives, Inc. and ultimately was responsible for writing the final report. A Crucible Moment sought to bring reason where rigid ideology drummed out debate, clarity where there was needless obfuscation, and a way forward that promised to set higher education back on a course consistent with that articulated by the Founding Fathers, Harvard’s General Education in a
Free Society and the Truman Commission. But it expands earlier recommendations considerably in order to address the dynamic global moment. Reinforcing the notion that higher education should prepare students for “both knowledgeable citizenship and economic opportunity” (p. 10), the report describes a range of humanities-associated outcomes when it argues:

“Higher education in a robust, diverse, and democratic country needs to cultivate in each of its graduates an open and curious mind, critical acumen, public voice, ethical and moral judgment, and the commitment to act collectively in public to achieve shared purposes. In stark contrast, higher education in a restrictive, undemocratic country needs only to cultivate obedient and productive workers.” (p. 10)

The report is ambitious in its agenda as it makes sweeping but achievable recommendations and then offers concrete ways to implement them both at the individual and institutional levels. Responding to current contentious debates about higher education, the report consistently seeks to integrate preparation for lifelong learning and employment with preparation for the demanding role of being an informed, active, and responsible citizen, whether enacting one’s civic conscience at work or being an activist in one’s local or global community after hours. Integrating citizenship and careers, A Crucible Moment (2012) insists, has several elements at its core:

“Knowledgeable citizenship—US and global—surely requires a grounding in history, US and world cultures, the humanities, and the social and natural sciences. It also requires what Martha Nussbaum has called cultivation of a ‘narrative imagination’: the capacity to enter into worldviews and experiences different from one’s own.” (p. 9)

While humanities courses and the capabilities they help to develop are part of almost every student’s college education today, defining those ends transparently as linked to educating for a diverse democracy is less common. A Crucible Moment seeks to entwine the two, both within the humanities and in every other discipline. The report urges such learning be expected rather than optional, pervasive rather than piecemeal. While an appeal to all disciplines to play their respective complementary and reinforcing roles, the report makes clear that progress cannot be made without the humanities as a vital part.

Thus, three of the five actions deemed essential were:

- **Reclaim and reinvest in the fundamental civic and democratic mission** of schools and of all sectors within higher education.
- **Advance a contemporary, comprehensive framework for civic learning**—embracing US and global interdependence—that includes historic and modern understandings of democratic values, capacities to engage diverse perspectives and people, and commitment to collective civic problem solving.
- Expand the number of robust, generative civic partnerships and alliances, locally, nationally, and globally to address common problems, empower people to act, strengthen communities and nations, and generate new frontiers of knowledge. (p. 30).

All three recommendations are made in full consciousness of the current complex, intertwined, stratified world, distinguished by its diversity. Democratic aims are thus all the more difficult to achieve. Negotiating across those differences—across radically different religions, races, genders, ideologies, identities, values, and experiences of democracy—is the challenge of the day both within a single country like the United States as well as within and across the vast differentiated global community. To do that well takes imagination, empathy, flexibility, understanding of context and histories, and a certain comfort level with ambiguities. It takes, in other words, as much art as it does certainty. It takes capabilities associated with and cultivated historically as the principal, even if not exclusive, province of the humanities.

Echoing, then, the multiple aims of colonial Yale University, which identified the humanities as one means of achieving those aims, the first bulleted recommendation reaffirms the continuing importance of putting knowledge in the service of the public good and democratic ends. The second emphasizes the humanities more explicitly in its call for a much broader definition of knowledge and sensibilities needed in the twenty-first-century historical context. If the first action is the recognition of the purpose of higher education and the second the expanded definition of what civic learning entails today, the third focuses on what constitutes—and how one enacts—democratic engagements. This is the task James Baldwin names in the epigraph for this article. Collaborative work co-creates new space where civic problem-solving and citizen action expand the boundaries of knowledge and strengthen the social and economic fabric. The more sophisticated application of civic learning occurs when humanities-associated capabilities are integral to the process. This recommendation forecasts one like it in The Heart of the Matter (2013) calling on all disciplines to address “Grand Challenges,” on the grounds that “Humanists and social scientists are critical in providing cultural, historical, and ethical expertise and empirical analysis to efforts that address issues such as the provision of clean air and water, food, health, energy, and universal education” (p. 11). Taking differing and dissonant perspectives seriously requires listening, interpreting and analyzing, and understanding origins and contexts, all of which the humanities cultivate when put to the purpose of educating for diverse democracies.

In seeking to make education for democracy commonplace on campuses, the national report acknowledges that institutional change rests on individual change. Baldwin (1956) agrees. He argues that one Grand Challenge Americans face is the “enormous…and individual effort” to understand what a word like justice or freedom might mean to another person. The arena for such discoveries occurs both in and out of the classroom, hastened by having diverse student bodies,
faculty, and staff. Within the classroom itself, where new ideas and new world views are introduced, one’s own certainties can sometimes be uncomfortably displaced. Kristen Case (2014), professor of English at the University of Maine at Farmington, describes this aspect of what can happen in a humanities classroom, when students are deeply engaged with one another’s ideas, as “instants of apprehension in which old worlds collapse and new possibilities are articulated.” She argues that such moments are “the heart of the humanities classroom” because they cause students to take “a step away from a complacent knowing into a new world in which, at least at first, everything is cloudy, nothing is quite clear.” According to Case, “The most fundamental element of a real humanities education—the power to doubt and then to reimagine”—has embedded in it a sense of agency, but agency that grows out of new understandings gleaned because one has taken other people and their perspectives seriously. “We cannot be a democracy if this power is allowed to become a luxury commodity,” she emphatically insists.

Similarly, Maxine Green describes the classroom as democratic space in which students can come to understand themselves and others differently because students use one of humanities signature devices: they tell stories. In the combination of narrating their own story and listening carefully to the stories of others, they take “a step away from a complacent knowing into a new world.” Green (1993) explains:

“...democracy is forever incomplete, it is founded in possibility. Even in the small, the local spaces in which teaching is done, educators may begin creating the kinds of situations where at the very least, students will begin telling the stories of what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know, exchanging stories with others grounded in other landscapes, at once bringing something into being that is in-between... It is at moments like these that persons begin to recognize each other and, in the experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another.” (p. 218)

Green is paying tribute to John Dewey, who believed one of education’s most essential purposes was to prepare people for active democratic citizenship. He defined democracy as “more than a form of government,” saying “it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1916: 87). Preparing students for and giving the students practice in “associated living” and “communicated experiences” mean immersing them in the transformative waters of the humanities. Other disciplines can certainly reinforce these ends, but this work is, as the report suggests, at the very heart of humanities:

“The humanities remind us where we have been and help us envision where we are going. Emphasizing critical perspective and imaginative response, the humanities...foster creativity, appreciation of our commonalities and our differences, and knowledge of all kinds.” (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2013: 9).
A Crucible Moment similarly makes a case that a twenty-first century framework for civic learning and democratic engagement needs to embrace a much more comprehensive set of knowledge, skills, and values than typically understood. In doing so, Crucible underscores democracy’s dependence on the humanities. Moreover, collective action is delineated as a required aspect of civic learning, challenging both the comfortable cerebral practices of higher education in general and the often speculative stance of the humanities in particular. The broader conceptual framework also opens up more expansive ways to include more faculty, more domains on campus for democratic engagement, and more strategic institutional changes in curriculum and policy. Here is how A Crucible Moment (2012: 4) describes the range of civic capabilities needed in the twenty-first century across those four categories (Figure 1):

This bountiful list reflects both the expansion in scholarship about diversity, the more accurate rendering of human history that is now part of foundational knowledge in higher education by informed educators, and the global context in which all learning and action now occur. Several aspects are worth special notice for those committed to the humanities and those quick to dismiss their relevance.

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<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Collective Action</th>
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<tr>
<td>Familiarity with key democratic texts and universal democratic principles,</td>
<td>Critical inquiry, analysis, and reasoning</td>
<td>Integration of knowledge, skills, and</td>
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<td>and with selected debates—in US and other societies—concerning their</td>
<td>Quantitative reasoning</td>
<td>examined values to inform actions taken</td>
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<td>applications</td>
<td>Gathering and evaluating multiple sources of</td>
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<td>Historical and sociological understanding of several democratic</td>
<td>evidence</td>
<td>Morality discernment and behavior</td>
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<td>movements, both US and abroad</td>
<td>Seeking, engaging, and being informed by</td>
<td>Navigation of political systems and</td>
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<td>Understanding one’s sources of identity and their influence on civic</td>
<td>multiple perspectives</td>
<td>processes, both formal and informal</td>
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<td>values, assumptions, and responsibilities to a wider public</td>
<td>Written, oral, and multi-media communication</td>
<td>Public problem solving with diverse partners</td>
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<td>Knowledge of the diverse cultures, histories, values, and contestations</td>
<td>Deliberation and bridge building across</td>
<td>Compromise, civility, and mutual respect</td>
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<td>that have shaped US and other world societies</td>
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<td>Exposure to multiple religious traditions and to alternative views</td>
<td>Written, oral, and multi-media communication</td>
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<td>about the relation between religion and government</td>
<td>Deliberation and bridge building across</td>
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<td>Knowledge of the political systems that frame constitutional</td>
<td>consensual decision making</td>
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<td>democracies and of political levers for influencing change</td>
<td>Ability to communicate in multiple languages</td>
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<td>Values</td>
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<td>Ethical integrity</td>
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<td>Responsibility to a larger good</td>
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The emphasis in the overall framework, but particularly in its knowledge categories, is on democracy as unfinished rather than completed, and on its principles as generating debate and deliberation rather than certainty. In that fluid world, the humanities can function as Virgil did to Dante in *The Divine Comedy*. They typically offer a way to pose questions, to entertain possibilities, to interpret the world, its cultures, and its people, and to offer moral and ethical frameworks for actions taken or anticipated. Such an approach to civic learning and democratic engagement, taught purposefully as education for democratic engagement and enlightenment, leads to Maxine Green’s world of “in-between” and Kristen Case’s “step away from a complacent knowing into a new world.”

In the “Knowledge” category above, identity is named uncharacteristically as an important dimension of civic learning and is understood as deeply linked to inherited and self-chosen communities that shape one’s identity. This is territory where the humanities have plowed and cultivated with special zeal and insight over time, especially as influenced by scholarship about race, class, gender, religion, and other markers of identity. Within this comprehensive framework of education for citizenship as it is played out in a diverse democracy and globally interdependent world, the humanities function as a global positioning system (GPS). They locate the individual in a larger context and can provide a moral compass that illuminates the human landscape. In making the invisible visible, empathy can be cultivated.

Recognizing the diversity of the world while also examining it critically in an effort to understand it more fully is also a distinctive purview of the humanities, especially since the humanities in the latter part of the twentieth century began to include all of humanity in their definition and not just a thin shard. The relationship of diversity, empathy, and imagination to democratic practice is eloquently articulated by philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010) who writes:

Finally, we need the imaginative ability to put ourselves in the positions of people different from ourselves, whether by class or race or religion or gender. Democratic politics involves making decisions that affect other people and groups. We can only do this well if we try to imagine what their lives are like and how changes of various sorts affect them. The imagination is an innate gift, but it needs refinement and cultivation; this is what the humanities provide.

In a recent Robert M McCormick-funded project I directed, called “Defining Civic Inquiry and Action in the Disciplines” (AAC&U, 2014) a consortium of colleges and universities in the Chicago metropolitan area generated a telling insight as different disciplinary clusters revealed which capabilities their disciplinary clusters were especially effective in cultivating. The clusters had used the framework chart from *A Crucible Moment* as their touchstone for discussion. The humanities cluster claimed it was especially strong in the cultivation of knowledge, skills, and values but barely showed a pulse in the collective action category. By contrast the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) cluster asserted it was strong in the
cultivation of collective action, skills, and knowledge but found values irrelevant. The initial assessment in the first meeting of the clusters suggests that a student will need to be exposed to both humanities and STEM courses to benefit fully from an education for democracy. At the same time, the STEM faculty found themselves a bit adrift by acknowledging they were pursuing their disciplines in the absence of values. Similarly, the humanities faculties were discomforted by the revelation that they had written out collective action as a capability they were fostering in their disciplines.

**What does a civic-minded campus look like?**

*A Crucible Moment* provided one other way to map a twenty-first-century vision that embodied the recommendation of The Truman Commission to “be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and process” and enact that “at all levels and in all its fields of specialization” (1947: 102). Unlike the definitional framework that identifies the dimensions of the learning outcomes for students, this additional chart puts the spotlight on the attributes of the college or university itself. What would an institution that aimed to educate students for democratic citizenship actually look like? In drafting its profile, the report identifies four institutional dimensions: civic ethos, civic literacy, civic inquiry, and civic action. As in the framework definitions, the institutional portrait requires the humanities be part of its DNA. On the following page is the chart (2012: 15) that describes possible aspects of this imagined civic-minded campus (Figure 2):

The humanities-rich portrait in the discussion of a Civic Ethos is unmistakable, as it draws on capacities closely understood to be linked to religion, philosophy, literature, art history, ethnic and women’s studies, and communication. Civic Literacy, rooted as it is in reflecting an historical consciousness, is dependent on the humanities for its achievement, while the value of understanding multiple perspectives and developing a critical consciousness are essential humanities-linked outcomes in Critical Literacy. Finally, drawing on moral courage and understanding how to work with others through and despite differences, each of which is fostered by humanities study, are both qualities necessary for Civic Action, even though—as noted above—humanities practitioners sometimes seem to find it challenging to move from a speculative, interpretative, imaginative stance to taking action.

**Putting humanities civic values into practice**

Faculty creativity in designing a humanities-rich curriculum intended to generate many of the capabilities identified in *A Crucible Moment* is stunning. The student learning is enhanced when there is an intentional curricular design in place with a developmental arc of learning over time. The following examples reveal how some advanced campuses—like University of the Pacific and University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB)—have clear bones shaping their curriculum that give structure
to what and how students are learning across all four years, from first year to capstone project. Others, like Chandler-Gilbert Community College and Kingsborough Community College (KCC), demonstrate how to generate ligaments along the bone of a two-year curriculum. The newest trend is for advanced institutions like Allegheny College to require an independent integrative senior project so students can demonstrate what they have learned cumulatively. The final set of examples demonstrates the power of community-based learning and partnerships—one of the key recommendations in *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*—and the transformative learning that is occurring as the boundaries of the classroom extend into local and global communities. In these examples, one can see how humanities courses have reinvigorated education for democracy. But they also reveal how civic learning and democratic engagement have reinvigorated the humanities disciplines so they can have a more leavening and lasting effect on students’ learning for the public good.

Both the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California and the University of Alabama in Birmingham are examples of institutions that have built a civically oriented humanities curriculum as the spine of the education they offer students.
The University of the Pacific has developed a scaffolded sequence of three seminars (Pacific Seminars or PACS) required of all students that examines a recurring question: “What is a good society?” As writing intensive courses, PACS 1 and 2 (Matz, 2011) are typically taken in the first year, during which students use a common reader developed by the faculty to explore five key themes: “the self and self-reflection, family and interpersonal relationships, the institutions of civic society, citizenship and the state, and the environment” (p. 18). While the PACS 1 stresses perspective-taking and empathy across differences, PACS 2 invites students to take seminars that allow them to go into more depth on one of the themes from their readers. “Diversity and civic engagement remain common themes in PACS 2” and their signature assignment is a research paper (p. 18). Seminars, many of which are on humanities topics, focus on a range of subjects, including “forces that shape income inequality (You’ve Got Class), the social creation of gender roles (Cover Girls and Gutter Heroes), mass media representations of different identity groups (Media and Pop culture Critique), the role of religion on public life (The Religious Footprint)… and the human relationship to the environment (Gaia’s Got a Fever)” (p. 18). As seniors, students take their culminating PACS 3 seminar that emphasizes ethical self-understanding and ethical reasoning and all are required to compose a reflective autobiography about themselves as ethical agents. During the semester, “students learn about different moral development and ethical theories and examine different perspectives on issues related to family, friends, work, and citizenship” (p. 19).

The UAB adopted a similar, if even more comprehensive, strategy of structuring education for diversity, ethics, and civic responsibility from first year through multiple mid-points across the curriculum to a required senior capstone course lodged within different disciplines. UAB’s First Year Experience is organized around a common book, typically a novel or historical account, intertwined with discussions, campus events, and off campus outings to museums. The Freshman Learning Communities explore contentious issues that require an ethical and civic lens—issues such as ethnic warfare, socioeconomic and health disparities, immigration, and the racial history and contemporary dynamics of Birmingham seen through three disciplines, always including a humanities component. Building on their freshman year learning, students are expected to take two additional Ethics and Civic Responsibility (ECR) courses in their majors. Courses are designated as ECR only if they address four broad outcomes: ethical reasoning and decision making; knowledge about contemporary events and issues; civic responsibility; and the role and value of diversity. Therefore, whatever the course, the shadow of humanities’ expertise in ethics, diversity, and civic perspectives is cast even in non-humanities courses. The culminating course (Kurata, 2011: 17) is a senior capstone within each major, whether a humanities major or non-humanities major. All capstone experiences also raise ethical issues and help students reflect on their transition to post-graduation civic engagement, as students do internships, performances, research, portfolios, or community-based investigations.
In AAC&U’s project, “Bridging Cultures to Form a Union,” funded from 2012–2015 by the National Endowment for the Humanities in partnership with The Democracy Commitment: A Community College Initiative, several community colleges are incorporating themes of difference, community, and democratic thinking within humanities courses. At Chandler-Gilbert Community College in Phoenix, Arizona (ForWeb_BridgingCultures.pdf) 2013, a high enrollment history course on US History to 1865 has been redesigned to weave in themes of democracy’s unfinished work and to raise issues about the principles, debates, and contradictions over time. They have also created a Learning Community, as UAB has done, that links a cohort of students together in two or more courses that share a unified theme. It is called Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation. The fall offering, “The Humanities and the Democratic Imagination,” links a First-Year Seminar, a composition course, and a history course; the spring offering, “Linking Communities,” includes three courses: Immigration, Nationalism, and E Pluribus Unum, which collectively emphasize environmental ethics, women and society, and composition (p. 2).

Another institution in the Bridging Cultures project, Kingsborough Community College located in Brooklyn, has just passed a civic engagement requirement. Students (Fakhari et al., 2013) will have to “complete two civic engagement experiences, either by taking courses designated as Civic Engagement (CE) sections or by participating in certified CE experiences” (p. 16). KCC is grounding their conception of the requirement in the role of the humanities, inspired by Martha Nussbaum’s description of how the humanities nurture “three capacities that are crucial to producing a responsible, globally-minded citizenry in a pluralistic democracy: critical thinking, proficiency in bridging and understanding different cultures and religions, and the ability to imagine and sympathize with the situation of others” (p. 17). While the goal is to educate informed citizens, KCC does not uncouple those civic ends from work, but rather argues that the college is committed to “helping its students develop a strong sense of social responsibility, leadership, empathy, and interpersonal skills that are essential in today’s workplace” (p. 19).

Another example of how humanities can combine powerfully with civic engagement and high impact practices in an integrative, culminating project is represented in the work of Katie Beck, a 2014 graduate of Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, where all students must major and minor in two different disciplinary domains and do an individual senior project. Beck, a white woman, is a theatre major and a Values, Ethics and Social Action minor. She decided to do her project on the Underground Railroad in Meadville, where Allegheny is located, and link that struggle for democracy to the larger Civil Rights Movement in the next century (Roos, 2013). Her initial interest was inspired by Richard Henderson, who was born a slave in Maryland in 1801 but escaped and made his way to Meadville by 1824 (ExplorePAhistory.com, nd). Between then and the end of the Civil War, Henderson is said to have helped 500 runaway slaves to freedom (ExplorePAhistory.com, nd). In addition to traditional historical research on her topic, Beck wanted to do community-based theater informed by narratives of
living people. She therefore arranged interviews and story-circles with community residents, some of whom attended the AME Bethel Church, which Henderson had helped found. As she gathered stories from residents, she wove into her final play contemporary experiences of the 1960s Civil Rights struggle and life as an African American in the twenty-first century. As she explained in her remarks before the performance I watched in the winter of 2014, the shape of her play was determined by the narrative voices of the people she listened to and read about. The play was appropriately entitled, “Our Own Sounds.”

In the production I attended, both the actors and the director spoke during the question and answer period afterwards about the transformative experience of being in the play. The outcomes identified with humanities disciplines were explicitly named. They talked of the power of seeing oral history become a work of art, of stepping into roles that required surrendering to another person’s identity, and of living in the unfamiliar space created by performing the play, which brought typically divided communities and people with differing views into intense and intimate relationship with one another. Achieving this was possible because of the community-inclusive way the play was created and by the decision to include actors across generations who also represented people from multiple races, some of whom were students and some of whom were from the town of Meadville. In reliving history through this specifically constructed performance, they spawned a new racial narrative for twenty-first century America. “Our Own Sounds” offers persuasive evidence of the transformative effect of robust, reciprocal, and generative campus/community partnerships recommended in *A Crucible Moment*.

Other formulations that bring historical periods into new focus while transforming current dynamics can be found in the Black History Preservation project at Syracuse University. Like the challenge Beck faced in Meadville, the long-standing nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of the black community in central New York is not in a central archive but preserved in memory, family memorabilia, churches, and community organizations. In a project that takes the humanities off the campus and into the community, The Black History Preservation Project is creating a virtual museum though a digital library created through a partnership with community residents, organizations, and faculty and staff.

Lehigh University, in the former heartland of Bethlehem Steel in Pennsylvania, has developed in collaboration with the residents of Bethlehem what it calls the South Side Initiative (SSI) “in order to share knowledge, foster democracy, and improve the quality of life in our city”. SSI (“About”) identifies its two overriding goals in the following ways:

- to foster the exchange of knowledge, enabling students and faculty to share specialized academic expertise with our neighbors, and enabling community members to share local forms of knowledge, historical memory, and cultural practice with those in the university and
- to address pressing challenges in the life of the city, by creating opportunities for informed democratic deliberation and action.
In addition to organizing joint events and working groups, this sustained campus/community partnership has initiated a series of “community partnership courses, team taught by Lehigh faculty and community members, to facilitate the reciprocal exchange of historical knowledge and to promote experiential learning about the dynamic relationship between past and present” (SSI, “Courses”). Like Syracuse, Lehigh is also working to develop a “state-of-the-art digital media platform to make oral histories, photographs and videos, and primary source documents available for interactive use by people throughout our community and around the world,” drawing on the expertise of Lehigh’s Library and Technology Services (SSI, Public History, Digital Media & Documentary Film). One dimension of the partnership is adopting “socially-engaged documentary filmmaking as a means of exploring topics such as the rise and fall of Bethlehem Steel, the history of industrial labor and the past and present of the American labor movement, immigrant communities on the South Side, post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, and the effects of the gaming industry on urban communities” (SSI, Public History, Digital Media & Documentary Film). Among humanities courses involved in these civically oriented investigations and collaborative action projects are “Literature and Social Justice” in the English Department, “Community Study Through Documentary Film” through American Studies, and “American Food: From the Supermarket to the Southside”, co-sponsored by both the History Department and American Studies.

Humanities in action

These examples offer only a snapshot of the innovation in and through the humanities propelled by civic means and ends. As evident in almost all of these examples, typically the humanities are touching shoulders, if not fully entwined, with other disciplines, and increasingly the humanities are discovering the bracing air outside of academic structures where they can fully engage with—what else?—humanity. There urgent questions and issues of their day drive how humanities courses are taught, while a more accurate understanding of the past makes a more democratic future possible. However, Green and Case also remind us that some of the best work of the humanities is also done in the humble quiet of an intimate classroom where students come to know and trust one another and in the process move “a step away from complacent knowing.” Whether thinking anew occurs on the campus or off of it, Toni Morrison (2002), in a powerful call, warns professors to be unapologetic about their value-laden disciplines, among which the humanities are prominent. Morrison cautions:

If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us. (2002: 7)
In coming full circle to a reaffirmation of the multiple purposes of colleges and universities, today’s academy—situated as it in the US, in a diverse democracy and interdependent globe—needs to continue its tri-partite mission: to advance knowledge, cultivate examined values, and foster responsibility to others. To accomplish all three requires the humanities. Likewise, the humanities also are dependent for their vitality and integrity on acknowledging their deep roots in civic soil, whether that soil has a history of blood running through it, the transcendent pleasure of art, or the life-affirming resilience of the human spirit. The arts of the humanities are necessary to help us face, interpret, and ultimately sing our way from the soil to the wondrous open air. As Azar Nafisi (2006) puts it so eloquently, “Imaginative knowledge provides us with a way to see ourselves in the world, to relate to the world, and thereby, to act in the world” (p. 6).

References


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