

# Honors Composition: Humanity beyond the Humanities

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CHEMICAL ENGINEERING PROFESSOR: Writing is the most important skill that students can have.

ME: Then why do I work in the lowest-paid department on campus?

CHEMICAL ENGINEERING PROFESSOR: Even lower than art?

ME: Yes, even lower than art.

—a recent exchange during a break in interviewing prospective honors students

In “The Humanities Are Dead! Long Live the Humanities!” Larry Andrews argues that the humanities are essential to the core purpose and nature of honors education in promoting the foundations of academic curiosity and intellectual rigor. When he discusses the breadth and depth of contributions that humanities faculty have made to NCHC as an organization and to honors education in general, he states:

English professors are notorious for dipping into other fields and thinking that their ken stretches over the whole intellectual domain. Expressed in a more kindly fashion, they (we, I) suffer from an endless appetite for exploration. They are less condemned to specialization than many of their colleagues in other fields. Delighting in the fact that they always have more books to read and more ideas to engage, they also seek to reach out to the social sciences, sciences, and even professional studies. . . . Where better to do this than in an honors program?

As a professor of composition and technical communication, I have found that “dipping into other fields” is neither a form of disciplinary overreach nor a dilettante diversion but rather an integral part of my job. In a traditional English department, what I do is considered service teaching, providing a service to other departments and colleges rather than teaching English majors. Occasionally, I see an English, history, or philosophy major on my roster, with a smattering from the natural and social sciences, but I spend the majority of my instructional time working with students from pre-professional programs such as engineering, computer science, biomedical sciences, health care management and informatics, graphic design, and secondary education. My working with so many students, honors and non-honors alike, from a range of professional disciplines provides a unique perspective on the interdisciplinarity of college studies.

During application interviews and orientation activities, honors students learn that I am an English professor and inevitably begin to discuss their favorite canonical works, most in an honest effort to make a connection with their new teacher but some with a bent toward impressing or challenging me. When I politely reply that I do not teach literature classes, they are taken aback, usually uttering a brief, stunned “Oh” as if to say, “What is English if not literature?” In fact, I have no degrees in literature: I earned my bachelor’s degree in mass communications, my master’s degree in composition pedagogy, and my doctorate in rhetoric and professional communication. In my department, I am the only tenured faculty member with no literature degrees; even the outgoing writing program administrator and another colleague who specializes in technical writing have literature degrees in their backgrounds. When Andrews summarizes American culture’s current derision of careers in the humanities, he observes, “For two decades the glut of PhDs in English in a poor job market has caused some academics to warn that graduating so many is immoral.” Unlike some of my literature colleagues, I did not have a horrific

experience on the job market. I did not have to go through the interminable, intolerable MLA job search process more than once, nor did I have to accept non-tenure or part-time positions at multiple schools before landing a coveted tenure-track position. During my first, last, and only trip to MLA (in the pre-Skype era), I had nine hour-long interviews in two days, resulting in five campus visits and a choice of job offers. The pool of literature positions may have contracted appreciably during the last two decades, but I secured a writing position on my first venture into the marketplace.

I believe that my employability was founded in part on the interdisciplinary nature of my work, with technical writing in one hand and honors composition in the other. The first course I taught as a master's-level teaching assistant was honors composition; with help from the writing program administrator, I revived a moribund honors course that was on the books but had not been taught for years. As a doctoral candidate, I began teaching technical writing, which introduced me to a variety of majors from engineering and computing to animal science and pre-health career tracks of every stripe. In turn, I steered the focus of my honors composition course away from the stereotypical gun control/abortion/euthanasia style of generalized, topical writing toward more discipline-specific research and argumentation projects, which noticeably increased not only student engagement in the course but also subsequent completion of the research-based senior honors thesis project. With this desire to focus on quality undergraduate education, I was never interested in competing for a slot as a two-books-for-tenure superstar in a rhet/comp doctoral program. I wanted to work at a regional public institution with an honors program, such as the one I had attended, because I was confident in my ability to make a difference as a teacher while continuing to do honors composition research that might not have merited tenure at a traditional R1.

I also brought nonacademic writing experience to the table, and that work was interdisciplinary in nature as well. For my undergraduate internship in communications, I worked in the new business department of an advertising agency. My main responsibility was to write background reports on companies that the executives were interested in developing as clients. If they were making a pitch to The Medicine Shoppe, I would gather research on the pharmaceutical industry; if they were pitching a local Taco Bell franchiser, I would research the fast-food industry. Realizing that advertising was not the career track for me, I left that position after graduation, but when the agency asked me to stay a day to teach the two new interns how to write (as if one could

accomplish this feat in a single day), I decided to apply to graduate school in English with an eye toward consulting. While working on my doctorate, I took a consulting job with Sandia National Laboratories, where a partner and I worked on writing the manual for a software program entitled Explosive Release Atmospheric Dispersion; in the event that government and military officials could not prevent a device from detonating, they could use this software to predict where the fallout would go in the air, on land, and in the water. Although the pay for government contract work was obscenely high, I quickly grew weary of lying awake at night worrying about bombs exploding and wondering whether the nuclear physicists and HAZMAT-trained firefighters using the software would be able to decipher the help manual, so I decided to remain in the relatively safe confines of the classroom.

As an English teacher, I do not “suffer from an endless appetite for exploration”—I revel in it. I love to teach because I love to learn, whether it is LEED certification, ethical hacking, HIPAA regulations, or Adobe Creative Suite. When teachers say that they learn a great deal from their students, they are often met with eye rolling, sighs of disbelief, and a declaration that their job is to teach students, not be taught by them. I heartily disagree. My technical writing students must make the transition from academic writing for a grade to workplace writing in which they have to convey field-specific information effectively so that a real audience can make a decision or take a course of action. Similarly, my honors freshmen are building the writing skills that they will need to navigate writing and research projects in any discipline. Therefore, when my students can successfully explain their discipline-specific work to me and to classmates from different majors, when they have learned enough to have thoughtful discussions about topics from everyone’s majors, then I have achieved one of my main pedagogical objectives.

My favorite classical definition of rhetoric is Quintilian’s *vir bonus, dicendi peritus*, or “the good man speaking well.” I require the dreaded oral presentation in all of my classes in one form or another, whether individual or group, typically PowerPoint-based, to prepare for future presentations in the workplace or at professional conferences. I am also a proponent of the desks-in-a-circle, seminar-style format; for my honors composition classes, this takes the form of weekly discussions of short articles related to students’ research paper topics. As the weeks go by, students not only learn about each other’s majors, but they also get to know each other better as people, which in turn builds a strong honors community. Years later, students tell me how much they valued the discussions, that no one had asked for their opinions before or had encouraged them to explore so many different topics.

Occasionally, if the class proceeds with care, the discussion of an article will herald a life-altering event. Students have approached me, with trembling hands or with strong voices, stating that they need to change their majors; others have sat in my office in tears, worried about family pressures to follow or avoid particular career paths. Some discussions have led to extremely personal breakthroughs. Students have come out to the class, discussed their alcohol and drug addictions, and detailed their childhood cancer treatments. An article for Banned Books Week about parents wanting to remove a sex education book from a library prompted one especially brave young woman to share her story that she had given birth in high school but that her baby had died, a revelation that altered the barometric pressure in the classroom and forged a closer bond among the students, promoting more honest discussion and, I suspect, allowing the student a much-needed catharsis. At the end of the class period, I made sure to acknowledge the student's willingness to share her story before I beat a hasty retreat to my office, closed the door, and burst into tears. During these moments, I sometimes grumble to myself, "Math teachers don't have to deal with this," which is untrue to a certain extent. A compassionate teacher in any discipline can nurture students through times of crisis. The difference is that discussing the crisis is not an inherent part of the work in those classes: it is not solving a differential equation or titrating a sample or coding in C++.

Therein lies the humanity within the humanities: the kindness, the sympathy, the compassion; a *good person* speaking well.

Rhetoricians teach the Aristotelian triad of modes in appealing to an audience: *logos*, logic and reasoning; *pathos*, the emotions of the audience; and *ethos*, the character and credibility of the speaker. In my writing classes, I caution my students not to focus solely on facts to the exclusion of responsible appeals to emotion and ethics. Pre-medical students should, for example, take the time to listen carefully to their patients, a concept promoted by Columbia University's graduate program in Narrative Medicine. Similarly, engineers should think about the people who will be drinking their treated wastewater or driving on their bridges or living in their hurricane-zone buildings. Honors administrators and faculty consider students to be the leaders of the future in their disciplines of choice and strive to give them the tools to be responsible, ethical citizens. Fast-tracking students past their humanities courses deprives them of opportunities to develop their critical thinking and writing skills beyond those of an eighteen-year-old high school senior before they have to complete advanced projects in their majors, and it also limits them to trade-school coursework in increasingly narrow disciplinary specializations without

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giving them valuable chances to discover the interdisciplinary connection—the human connection—among all majors. Development of mature critical thinking and writing skills takes both time and experience, and it should not be reduced to a checkmark on a graduation sheet.

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