

Imagination and the Humanities in Honors across the Disciplines at a Jesuit University

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In 1988, I was a graduate student in English in New York City, and I found myself despairing of the field. I had always imagined that I would find a way to “make the world a better place,” to “heal” it in one translation of the Hebrew *tikkun ha’olam*. Instead, or so it seemed in my darker reflections, I was busy trying to parse what French theorists were saying in essays that seemed to make little sense in either the original or the translation. My college classmates, off to careers in law, medicine and business, seemed poised to make differences I never could.

Then I picked up a copy of *The New York Times* that day, and I was struck by what two of the lead stories had in common. The notorious *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie was still in its early days, and there was unprecedented unrest in Czechoslovakia around the continued imprisonment of playwright Václav Havel. Both were writers, humanists by design or default, and each was shaking the world, challenging a totalitarian mood by the simple act of unleashing his imagination in directions he could not have anticipated.

These two stories were all I needed to get me through that particular period of doubting the value of work in the humanities. They inspired me to see the extent of a single human experience and helped me imagine I could still make the difference I wanted if I went to the classroom and worked on my own writing. I saw in these stories a kind of applied humanities, the work of the imagination in the world.

As Larry Andrews's essay reminds us, the humanities again—or still—seem under assault. When our graduates leave us with an average student loan debt of more than \$50,000, we can easily see why we face so much pressure to measure the value of a degree by the concrete opportunities it opens up. Reading a poem or arguing about what Plato means is all well and good, but, if it doesn't help our graduates find work (so the implicit argument goes), it is not valuable enough. The translation of "not valuable" in that context might be "insufficiently practical" or simply "too imaginative."

In my literature classes, I find myself extolling the importance of critical thinking all the more. Yes, I still believe in the intrinsic value of reading literature, but now I make a point of reminding my students that the work of that reading prepares them for the professional world. When they read carefully, they train themselves to be better corporate contributors. When they write well, they put themselves forward as more capable participants in professional exchange. I have sacrificed nothing in the work of the class, at least I hope not, but I find I have to justify it in these new ways because too many of our students understandably carry an implicit question wherever they go: Is this worth what I'm paying for it? That is, I feel pressure to underscore the humanities by showing that they are worth the price in some currency other than their own.

The story is different in my honors classes, however. At the University of Scranton, we do not tie scholarships to participation in the honors program. Our students are already high-achievers, so they tend already to receive our more substantial merit packages. The one financial benefit we do offer is to raise the number of credits they can take at the flat rate from eighteen to twenty-one. In other words, we try to give them their honors classes for free, charging them the same for an experience that requires more institutional resources than the norm.

We do not, though, spell out this honors advantage in financial terms; we assume that our honors students pursue honors for what feels like a purer motive. Our implicit message to students is that you do honors work here because you want to do it; it costs only your effort and your inspiration. The

work is its own reward whether it is something you pursue in a lab, a library, a clinic, or the field. Appreciate it for its own sake, or you will have to endure a grueling five-semester sequence.

Some who consider starting the program ask whether completing it will help them get into graduate or professional school, but I discourage crediting that kind of value to the program. I tell them “maybe,” but then I point out that any driven and talented student will likely stand out just as much without it. Yes, I justify the program to my administration in part by citing our placement numbers, but I think of them as correlated rather than causal. The best students choose honors and then go on to good post-graduate opportunities. Honors does not necessarily make them better students, but it gives them a focused opportunity to make themselves better.

This element of choice, of a student’s asking for “more . . . just because,” in the end inspires me and recalls the central value of the humanities in what we do. Such striving is, in itself, a core Jesuit concept. St. Ignatius called it “the magis,” the restless desire to hone oneself for the sake of better serving the world.

I am suggesting, then, that the humanities are an essential feature of honors education—certainly in the way we conduct honors at Scranton—in whatever field our students choose for their research. Our chemists and biologists, as much as our theologians and historians, do what they do in a spirit of human endeavor. Maybe they could do similar work with similar excellence elsewhere, but I believe that our context, the call to do something more than what they are otherwise required to do, fundamentally proposes a human value coloring that work.

We admit students to our program during the first semester of their sophomore year, and they do not begin until the following spring, so they have only two and a half years to complete the program. For our orientation experience, we offer a one-credit academic retreat called Ideamaking in which we read Thomas Kuhn and other thinkers about the sources of new ideas. We try, sometimes succeeding, to turn research into a philosophical problem, to make it in part a humanities project whatever its field. I insist on the centrality of imagination in any sustained work. I tell them that, even if they do not yet know what they will do in the next couple of years, they need to measure the “imaginative space” it will take up in their lives and in their studies.

We do go on to include humanities in direct ways as well, largely through ever-changing cross-disciplinary courses and a junior seminar calling on students to reflect on contemporary social and cultural issues. In addition, all our

students are required to take five classes in philosophy and theology, so they come to their honors work with a vocabulary of inquiry that colors their full educational experience.

For me, though, the part of directing the program that most restores my faith—the part that plays the same role in challenging my recurrent doubts about the potential of the humanities that reading about Rushdie and Havel did years ago—comes when I get to hear students present their final research projects in our Senior Capstone Seminar. Each student who explains her or his work before the others in the program does so as the culmination of an intellectual and personal experience. In that light, I have settled on a format for our senior banquet that consists largely of my reading tributes to each one of them. I do my best to reflect the personal, imaginative story of each student.

Not every student has done honors work in the humanities, but all experience research at a human level that necessarily recalls the work of the humanities. Each has asked for more, has taken on work that may have no value in the corporate sense we too often invoke. I originally turned to literature because I thought it might help heal the world. Now, as someone who teaches at least half-time in honors, I get the privilege of seeing some of the ways our students do this deeper work themselves. Our scientists and our pre-professional students pursue their studies in different ways, but they frame them with philosophy, literature, and personal experience. Honors research in that light is an expression of the self attempting to understand itself, which, however it manifests itself, is precisely the central subject of the humanities.

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