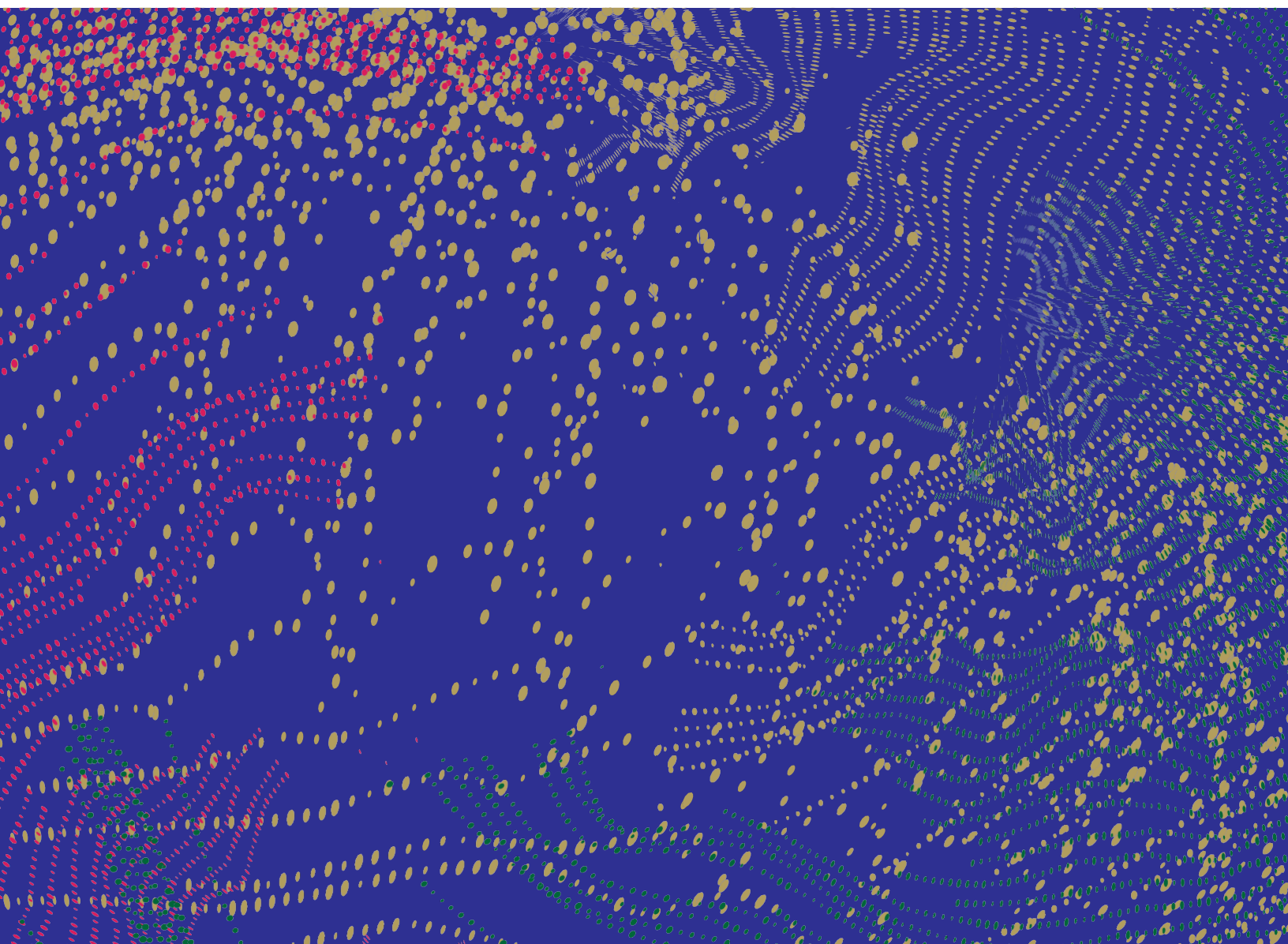


The World Humanities Report

Humanities in the United States

James Shulman, Eugene Tobin, et. al.



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Humanities in the United States

James Shulman and Eugene Tobin

(with Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, DaMaris Hill, K. J. Rawson, Ricardo Padron, Daniel Reid, Michael Roy, and Charles Watkinson)

The Unusual Characteristics of the Non-systemic US system of Higher Education

The landscape of institutions of higher education in the United States is vast and varied; from what began as an elite enterprise for the preparation of mostly Protestant churchmen from a wide range of denominations, we now see a large, fragmented and diverse array of institutions that enrolls more than 19 million students—that’s more students than the combined citizen population of Finland, the Republic of the Congo, New Zealand, and Panama. While some systems within some of the 50 US states do link together a set of institutions within that particular state, most US institutions of higher education stand alone as islands scattered across the landscape.

Over the course of more than two centuries, a combination of civic boosterism, denominational college expansion, large-scale philanthropy, and government investment ensured that college and university campuses would spring up around the United States. Very large “multi-versities,”¹ with nearly 80,000 resident students anchor cities like Columbus, Ohio; Gainesville Florida; and Tempe, Arizona. Community Colleges offer individual courses in degree or non-degree granting programs to over 8,000,000 students, ranging from pottery classes at North Country Community College (SUNY) in Saranac Lake, NY with a full-time enrollment of 750 students, to the Houston Community College System network which enrolls over 69,000 students. In small towns like Greencastle, Indiana; Carlisle, Pennsylvania; Moorhead, Minnesota, and Clinton, New York, residential liberal arts colleges are often the largest employers, important sources of cultural activity, and active collaborators with local government and community-based organizations in addressing urgent

¹ Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*: Fifth Edition (2001): *The Godkin Lectures on the Essentials of Free Government and Duties of the Citizen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 5.

societal challenges like climate change, rural poverty, food scarcity, and opioid addiction.

The academic humanities in the United States live within, and are shaped by, the policies and norms of this sprawling slightly interconnected archipelago of institutions of higher learning. The liberal arts—a curriculum characterized by a degree of depth and breadth within a course of study that doesn't narrowly prepare for any one profession²—continue to be widely seen as a legitimate component of undergraduate education across much of this vast and disparate set of institutions. The implications of this investment in general education are—structurally speaking—significantly determinative for the place of the humanities. Unlike many other countries in which neither a faculty of natural science nor a polytechnical school that provides career training has a place for the humanities, many US colleges have various types of humanities programs, most often including English and history departments. Over 900 English departments throughout the country offer a four-year bachelor's degree; 739 institutions have philosophy programs and 506 have an art history major. And many more institutions have courses and programs in these fields without offering a major. In other words, most US colleges and universities offer a different and broader curriculum than only the efficient pre-professional sorting function wherein universities admit and train students by an exclusive focus on various disciplines. The result of such an astounding number of colleges and universities having humanities programs is that millions of students encounter these fields even though their ultimate degree might be in business, education, or engineering (let alone other liberal arts fields like economics or chemistry). As a result, faculty (in most fields, but including the humanities) do not only teach to “insiders” focused on the professor's field; the faculty have to test themselves and their material against people with other interests. While there has been some diffusion of this style of “multi-faculty” universities in other parts of the world, the widespread assumption that most undergraduate students will be exposed to general education remains predominantly peculiar to the US. The more efficient channeling systems in other countries align with the goals and structure of the country's systems: the government subsidizes the system out of a recognition that higher education advances the “goals”—be they economic, political or cultural—of the state. In the fragmented arrangements in the US, universities work within a push-and-pull between societal needs and the

² Harry Brighouse, *HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND “LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION”?*
<https://uwmadison.box.com/s/9tkfd2uped5kr2j4dwxcgkeznpaobgg>.

desiderata of a particular market—the voice of students. While faculties within universities outside of the US have no particular discussion around general education and while preparation for careers are supported with mostly public funding, US colleges and universities represent an unusual amalgam of elite and mass education, of public and private goods. And the humanities as one of the core divisions of the liberal arts component of this amalgam are invited to the table to compete for the attention of students. To understand the status of humanistic scholarship in the United States in 2023, we need to begin by examining the forces—the state and the market—that shape how the humanities fit into this extensive but loose institutional network within US society.

The Influence of the State

In his last year in office, President Donald Trump created *The Presidential Advisory 1776 Commission* that was charged with articulating “a restoration of American education, which can only be grounded on a history of those principles” that is “accurate, honest, unifying, inspiring, and ennobling.” On January 18th, 2021, the antepenultimate day of the Trump presidency, the White House released the Commission’s report. In the closing days of an administration that had sought every opportunity to exercise unilateral executive power to achieve its aims—withdrawing from the Paris Climate accords, canceling the nuclear agreement with Iran, and issuing orders to separate refugee children from their families at the southern border—the publishing of an ideologically charged set of *recommendations* illustrate both the power that debates around the humanities continue to have in American life and the unusually resilient institutional fabric within which the work of the humanities is situated. While the Commission’s recommendations would quickly disappear from active status -- scrubbed from the White House website within 48 hours as the Biden administration began—the report has had continuing influence on the relationship between the government and higher education.

President Trump’s panel was designed as a rejoinder to a growing set of assertions on the part of scholars, public intellectuals, and human rights activists that racism has been embedded in American history since its beginnings—and particularly as a response to the *1619 Project*, which had sought to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the center of the national experience. These debates grew louder, more central, and violent during the Trump years: white supremacists marched on the campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, provoked by the debates about public

monuments celebrating “heroes” of the Confederacy while around the country cell phones captured too many episodes of the killing of black people by police. Debates around limiting or stopping immigration were central to the rise of Trump, despite the occasional recognition that the entire landmass was taken in conquest from Indigenous people by immigrants. These tensions were not invented by Donald Trump, though the effort to diminish both the scars of our past and the continuing racial inequities in our present were given new momentum in the Trump years.

At a time when the widespread renewed civil rights movement known as Black Lives Matter has sought to bring the awareness of ongoing racism into the civic square, the report sought to provide foundational material for the backlash movement to come. Publication on the White House site, even for mere hours, codified its place as a document of record. Many states—26 thus far—have since used the report and its arguments as the basis for proposing various state or local laws to outlaw “divisive topics” in the classroom. These debates—including the use of Critical Race Theory as a synecdoche for discussions of America’s racist history—originally focused on K-12 education in elections in which Republican candidates sought to win over voters by inciting fears of how white Americans might lost out to “the other.”

More recently, the political battleground has expanded to include the academic humanities in higher education. In February 2022, Dan Patrick, Lieutenant Governor of Texas, announced that he would “end tenure for all newly hired faculty members at the state’s public universities and . . . revoke the tenure of those who teach critical race theory.” He stated that “We are not going to allow a handful of professors who do not represent the entire group to teach and indoctrinate students with critical race theory, that we are inherently racist as a nation. . . . Tenure, it’s time that that comes to an end in Texas.” PEN America³ is tracking the rise of what they refer to as “Educational Gag Orders . . . state legislative efforts to restrict teaching about topics such as race, gender, American history, and LGBTQ+ identities in K-12 and higher education.” They note the rise of these bills (in the years following the release of the Trump-appointed Commission): “Of the 137 educational gag order bills introduced, 39 percent have targeted colleges and universities.” This challenge to the model of the freedom of academic ideas to spur pluralistic debate in US higher education

³ Founded in 1922, PEN America “works to ensure that people everywhere have the freedom to create literature, to convey information and ideas, to express their views, and to access the views, ideas, and literatures of others.” <https://pen.org/about-us/>.

has long been a haunting presence, as historian Joan Scott notes: “When the state finds itself at odds with critical thinking, we know the search for truth has been shut down; when populist operators decry the elitism of the academic establishment, we know knowledge production is being directed to nefarious ends.”⁴

The threat to the place of tenure as a mechanism for ensuring the freedom to research and teach about divisive topics is real, and the *1776 panel* advanced this culture war. And yet, the resilience of the structure of US higher education, including its unusual degree of fragmentation and its significant representation of private institutions, which are subject to less direct national or state influence, provides an unusual though by no means guaranteed bulwark against top-down control of what is taught about history, literature, culture, and ideas. In a time when a one-term US president was able to unilaterally undo so many government policies with a stroke of the pen, this episode reminds us of the strength and plasticity of an educational system in which humanistic discourse and scholarship are embedded. With minimal control over 13,000 K–12 school districts across 50 states and over 3,500 institutions of higher learning, and with the exception of a financial aid program for families who earn under \$60,000, the federal government provides little direct material support for undergraduate education and hence can only exercise modest power over symbolic debates.

The Influence of the Market

The absence of top-down control from the federal government is coincident with an absence of federal subsidy of student fees; the result of that lack of governmental subsidy is that US colleges and universities are far more dependent upon student fees than colleges and universities in other parts of the world.⁵ As a result, colleges compete—intensely—for students.⁶ In this section, we consider the role that responding to these market pressures plays in shaping the work of scholars and teachers in the humanities.

The role of market competition in the revenue seeking behavior of colleges and universities has been the subject of growing attention: In 1997, Sheila

⁴ Joan Scott, *Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom*, p. 104.

⁵ Individual states subsidize their own state’s public institutions to varying degrees, though with significantly less support in the 21st century. Fees remain largely the responsibility of students and families.

⁶ If one does a Google search for “billboard for colleges,” one sees the range of advertising that US colleges carry out in search of attracting students, including state universities advertising their costs and benefits to students from neighboring states.

Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie coined the term *academic capitalism* to describe the “market and market like behaviors on the part of universities and faculty” that occur as institutions and faculty compete for external resources through research grants and contracts, university–industry relationships, and student tuition and fees.⁷ The role of competition for profitable scientific discoveries, for television revenues associated with big-time athletics, and for students (especially students who can pay all or most of the full sticker price of tuition)—and the deleterious effects of these revenue-seeking activities are well documented.⁸ Historian Roger Geiger notes that the power of market forces increased significantly over the last forty years. “The current era of higher education that began around 1980 has been characterized by an overriding trend toward privatization. . . . Financial privatization resulted from a relative decline in state funding for higher education and a greater financial burden imposed on students and their families.”⁹ The effects of this increased turn towards the markets spilled over into the humanities in various ways. The “voice” of consumers increased in volume and vehemence as they shouldered more of the burden of supporting colleges. In the face of market pressures, colleges with a liberal arts emphasis may lose students to pre-professional programs that promise a more practical and discernable path to a job that will help them repay their loans. Over time, as the cost of higher education fees have increased, some voices (including [funders like Peter Thiel](#)) have urged students to not attend college at all.

The role of the market does not end with competition among colleges to bring students to campus.¹⁰ Once on one of the many campuses that offer a

⁷ Slaughter and Leslie, 1997.

⁸ See, for example, Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, Princeton, 2004.

⁹ Steadily rising tuition in both public and private sectors was made possible by differential pricing and student financial aid. As the cost of attendance exceeded affordability, the difference was supplied by federal student loans. The achievement of high participation, or universal higher education, was accompanied by differentials of institutional roles and student clienteles—an implicit bifurcation into selective and open sectors. Given the consumer-driven nature of the American system and the exaggerated impact of donative funds, this development favored private colleges and universities. The attraction of high-cost, high-quality education soared.

¹⁰ The oft-heard concern is that humanities are “losing” students to fields in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine (STEM). And it is true that there continue to be declines in BA attainment in the humanities: Humanities Indicators: <https://app.everviz.com/share/4JJLG6PtL>. But even as the numbers of majors decline, the humanities have faculty on many campuses and are, thus, still in the “game,” still able to adapt and represent themselves in ways that attract enrollments and majors. This competition generates another (and different) pull on the shape of the humanities than the top-down

wide curriculum, students make their choices of which courses to take among the range of offerings (within the liberal arts and across pre-professional disciplines as well). As departments and individual faculty members design, offer, and perform their classes, humanities faculty participate in the internal institutional competition for “market share” of students. Those students and the tuition dollars that they represent are the primary source for the support of humanistic research in the US. While funding agencies (both public, like the National Endowment for the Humanities and private, like the Mellon Foundation) provide millions of dollars of support, it is individual colleges and universities that expend resources to hire and sustain faculty in the humanities. As a result, institutional spending on the humanities far outweighs the limited pools of external research support. This institutional support is largely drawn from student fees, mostly according to formulas that track the number of students who enroll in particular majors. In essence, the more students who elect to major in particular departments, the more faculty positions in that department are financially supported by the college or university. This basic algebra of college and university financing stands at the core of humanities funding. In recent years, families, employers, and state legislatures have increasingly nudged students to pursue fields (science, technology, engineering, and medicine) that are seen to be more directly applicable to the employment market. Given the rising student fees and diminishing state level subvention of those fees, this anxiety concerning careers is understandable. If state-dictated directions represent one extreme pole of pressure for the humanities, a monocular focus on “how will your class bring me a financial return on the investment that I am making in attending it” from fee-paying students and families represents the other, market-driven, pole. But neither the top-down external state pressure nor the bottom-up market pressures are, in fact, unmediated. Instead, while these pressures are widespread and widely felt, the real ground for negotiation plays out in each class, in each department, on thousands of campuses.

Individual Institutions as the Locus of Negotiation and Innovation

In the vast middle space between the pull of society’s political pressures and the market-based pressures to respond to what students are seeking from college,

government pressures might. In the absence of significant national subsidy, humanistic scholarship has long been fostered by the place that humanities faculty have, and continually negotiate for themselves within the microeconomic functions of their particular institutional setting.

another competition plays out on each campus. Because of the existence of the thousands of varied campus microenvironments in which different institutional priorities and various student desiderata meet to negotiate, each campus represents its own play space for innovation and faculty-administration negotiation. As a way of tracing what a given institution may set as priorities, it is worth understanding the roots of the system that navigated the Scylla of government pressure and Charybdis of market demands to establish the place of the humanities, and to enable this space where faculty have certain degrees of freedom.

The Place of Academic Freedom and General Education

The structures undergirding the American higher education system are, like any social structure, created by decisions made and reinforced over time. The overarching concern about university independence, the professional autonomy of the academic workforce, principles of academic freedom, production and dissemination of knowledge, and the responsibility of higher education to serve the public good would be relevant in particular ways to the development of the academic humanities.¹¹ By 1915, when a small group of prominent faculty, including John Dewey (philosophy, Columbia), Arthur O. Lovejoy (philosophy, Johns Hopkins) and Edwin R. A. Seligman (economics, Columbia) founded the Association of American University Professors (AAUP) and formulated its Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure (1915), the academy had already experienced over 20 years of legislative interference and infringements of professional autonomy.¹² The AAUP justified the protection of academic freedom as a covenant based on the university as an institution (with established self-governing standards) that produces social goods required by the general public, rather than as a contract between individual scholars and the public. As a philosopher, educational reformer, and political activist, Dewey was uncomfortable with the separation of thought from experience and believed that intellectual specialization and breadth were complementary but over-specialization and the compartmentalization of knowledge represented “withdrawal from the larger issues of life.” Humanists and social scientists were at greater risk of losing academic freedom, he believed, precisely because their research and teaching explore disturbing, disruptive, and potentially

¹¹ Joan Wallach Scott, *Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), pp. 5-7.

¹² Walter P. Metzger, *Academic Freedom in the Age of the University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 139-193.

transformative ideas and conditions. “Unlike the mathematical and physical sciences,” which Dewey noted, “have secured their independence through a certain abstractness, a certain remoteness from matters of social concern,” faculty in the humanities and emerging social sciences would need the protection of academic freedom to pursue their critical social investigations because their research would inevitably confront deep-seated moral beliefs and prejudices.¹³ Rather than defend academic freedom as an individual right analogous to the First Amendment’s protections of free and critical inquiry granted all citizens, the AAUP contended that additional protection for faculty was “the price the public must pay in return for the social good of advancing knowledge.”¹⁴ Joan Scott cites the 1894 statement of the regents of the University of Wisconsin as a compelling vision for a code that protects the freedom of faculty:

We cannot for a moment believe that knowledge has reached its final goal, or that the present condition of society is perfect. We must therefore welcome from our teachers such discussions as shall suggest the means and prepare the way by which knowledge may be extended, present evils be removed, and others prevented. . . . In all lines of academic investigation it is of the utmost importance that the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of trust where they may lead.¹⁵

Wisconsin’s and other colleges and universities’ unusual degree of shared governance of their organizations grows out of this core value of protecting space for the faculty to control many aspects of the enterprise that protects their capacity to explore freely; at the same time, horizontal communities—the disciplines—through vehicles such as peer review are entrusted with determining what scholarly work constitutes legitimate expertise and qualifies for this protection. In this context, as Louis Menand observes, “the concept of academic freedom is at the core of any definition of the university.”¹⁶ This freedom to explore within a diverse and only loosely connected landscape of autonomous institutions has mostly shielded scholars from direct government influence.

¹³ Scott, pp. 10, 13–14, 20, 42, and John Dewey, “Academic Freedom,” in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 2, *Essays on Logical Theory, 1902–1903*, ed., Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), pp. 56–58, and John Higham, “The Matrix of Specialization,” in Alexandra Oleson and John Voss., eds., *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1920* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 7.

¹⁴ Finkin and Post, pp. 42–45.

¹⁵ Scott, *Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom*, 102.

¹⁶ Menand, “The Future of Academic Freedom,” 11.

The Voice of the Students in Challenging the Curriculum for Citizenship

While so many of the structures that we have reviewed—including the widespread adoption of the liberal arts curriculum and the expansive and diverse landscape of public and private institutions—go back to the 1800s, the most dramatic growth in US higher education occurred with the G.I. Bill that enabled World War II veterans to attend college and universities and the late 1950s post-Sputnik government spending on university research capacity. As post-World War II US higher education moved, seemingly overnight, from an elite to a government-supported mass system, an expansive network of two- and four-year public institutions opened their doors to a diverse, pluralistic student population. In the course of the 1960s, the students' interests and aspirations gradually contested the homogeneity of the Western canon, the impersonality of the “multiversity,” and the denigration of undergraduate education. Once government-supported research began pouring unprecedented amounts of money into “Big Science,” university missions changed and the rules of academic advancement and institutional reputation increasingly privileged specialized scholarship. “For the first time in the history of American higher education,” as Louis Menand observes, “research, rather than teaching or service, defined the model for the professor . . . all the way down the institutional ladder.”¹⁷ As the nation's private and public research universities gradually re-directed resources from undergraduate teaching to support graduate education and specialized research, the teaching of general education courses, which had never been highly valued by faculty or rewarded within the academy, continued to lose interest and support.¹⁸ Ultimately, the fractiousness, ideological division, and civil disorder generated by the antiwar, Civil Rights, and women's movements led to distrust and disillusionment over the university's support of government policies—particularly of the relationship between “big science” and the military industrial complexes—that were at odds with the academy's oft-

¹⁷ Menand, p. 76.

¹⁸ Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, p. 189; Stanley O. Ikenberry, “The Academy and General Education,” *Journal of General Education*, 22 (January 1971), 281–88; Clark Kerr, *The Great Transformation in Higher Education, 1960–1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 146; Roger L. Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge: America's Research Universities since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 46–47; and Daniels, p. 112.

espoused values and aspirations.¹⁹

By the mid-1960s, the emergence of innovative interdisciplinary fields like African American studies, women's, gender and sexuality studies, and cultural, and post-colonial studies brought formerly excluded scholars into the academy with interests that sat at critical angles to previously accepted notions of the "national interest" and "public good." These scholars not only expanded the canon and rejuvenated humanities teaching and research, their critiques restored academic freedom's efficacy as the protector of orthodoxy's legitimate critics and the defender of new knowledge.²⁰ Yet, even as general education lost prestige within the academy, heated debates about core curricula and general education continued to play a critical role in articulating the continuing importance of the humanities.

At a time when specialization, scientific research, and technical knowledge were invested in patents, corporate partnerships, and the appointment of institutional leaders from STEM fields, many humanities faculty identified their disciplines and scholarship as part of an academy-in-exile and in opposition to a neoliberal consumerist view of education that promoted pre-professional training over liberal learning.²¹ At the same time, a very significant shift in the professoriate was beginning.

The Changing Roles of Women in Higher Education and the Impact on the Humanities

In 1946, when President Harry Truman appointed a commission to plan the future expansion of higher education, only 2 of the 28 members were women. The Truman Commission subscribed to the prevailing ideology of gender difference that pervaded almost every aspect of postwar American society. The vast majority of contemporaries, including the male and female presidents of women's colleges, did not question the systemic institutional discrimination

¹⁹ See Labaree, pp. 150-151, Menand, p. 74, Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, p. 169, and Reitter and Wellmon, pp. 251-252.

²⁰ Joan W. Scott, "Academic Freedom as an Ethical Practice" in Louis Menand, ed., *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 166.

²¹ Colleen Lye, Christopher Newfield and James Vernon, "Humanists and the Public University," *Representations*, 116:1 (Fall 2011), 1; Ronald W. Cox, "The Corporatization of Higher Education," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, vol. 1, issue 1, Article 8, Florida International University Digital Commons, <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatpower/vol1/iss1/8/>; and Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

that severely limited women's opportunities in higher education, access to the professions, and participation in public life. "Although women in the 1960s had full access to undergraduate education," as Roger Geiger notes, "they were assumed to put home and family ahead of profession or career. They were regarded as less likely to complete advanced degree programs, less dedicated to professional careers, and less inclined to attain positions of leadership."²² In 1963, the year that Smith College alumna Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, women represented 38 percent of college students, 11 percent of new PhDs (the same portion as in 1910), and 20 percent of US college and university faculty.²³ These data points reflect differentials in male and female high school graduation rates, the disproportionate number of white male veterans who took advantage of the GI Bill, the decline in the age of women at the time of first marriages, and rising birth rates; but the primary reason preventing women's full participation in postwar American life was the patriarchal, caste-like system of gender difference, subordination, and sexism that governed their lives with almost absolute impunity.²⁴ This was especially true of the limited opportunities available to women in the academic humanities in the 1960s and a major impetus behind the emergence of the women's movement in contesting gender-based limitations.

In December 1969, separate efforts by the Radical Historians' Caucus and the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession disrupted the normally mundane and sparsely attended business meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA).²⁵ Amidst a raucous standing-room only crowd, statements and resolutions condemning the war in Vietnam, racial discrimination, and the limited opportunities afforded women in the academy reflected the turmoil that had been building on college and university campuses. In

²² Geiger, *American Higher Education Since World War II*, p. 229.

²³ Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), pp. 543-544; Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education," *Signs*, 3(1978),766; Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), pp. 51, 106-111; and Dongbin Kim and John L. Rury, "The Changing Profile of College Access: The Truman Commission and Enrollment Patterns in the Postwar Era," *History of Education Quarterly*, 47:3 (August 2017), 317.

²⁴ See an important study by Linda Eisenmann, *Higher Education for Women in Postwar America, 1945-1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 20, 51-54, and Mary Ann Dzuback's review in the *Journal of Social History*, 41:1 (Fall 2007), 192.

²⁵ Carl Mirra, "Forty Years On: Looking Back at the 1969 Annual Meeting," *Perspectives on History* (February 2010), 1-8. <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/february-2010/forty-years-on-looking-back-at-the-1969-annual-meeting>.

response, a newly established ad hoc Committee on the Status of Women issued a report documenting the number of PhDs granted to women and their hiring into the academy. Although liberal arts colleges, women's colleges, and some public universities began appointing, promoting, and tenuring women in their history departments in the 1920s and 1930s, major research universities remained unbreachable male bastions well into the postwar era. There were no women faculty members among the 160 full professors at the ten leading history departments in 1960. "A decade later," as Patricia Albjerg Graham, a member of the AHA Committee on the Status of Women noted, "these departments had a total of 272 full professors, of whom only two were women."²⁶ Gender balance was particularly elusive at Ivy League colleges even as these formerly all-male institutions adopted co-education. Princeton did not appoint its first tenured woman faculty member in any field until 1968; Yale had only two tenured women faculty members in 1969; and Harvard did not have a tenured full-time woman faculty member in the English department until 1981 and in Philosophy until 1989.²⁷

The changing place of women in the humanities is perhaps best viewed through the impact of feminist thought on teaching and research, most notably in the field of women's studies, which sought to "reenvision the lost history and culture of women and the construction of gender" with perspectives that question the values and definitions underlying patriarchal structures and institutions.²⁸ Beginning in the early 1970s, the Ford Foundation provided fellowships for PhD students and faculty, support for university centers and conferences for research on women, and subsidies for the Feminist Press and *Signs: The Journal*

²⁶ By the 1980s, about one-third of history PhDs were awarded to women and, most recently, women have received slightly less than one-half of all doctoral degrees in history. See Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Women Historians in Academia: The 1970 Rose Report," *Perspectives on History* (December 2020), 3. <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/december-2020/women-historians-in-academia-the-1970-rose-report>.

²⁷ Louis Menand, *The Free World*, p. 148. Menand notes that in 1976, women made up 3 percent of the arts and sciences faculty at Harvard, 1.6 percent at Yale, and 1 percent at Princeton. "Even at Berkeley, co-ed since 1871, women made up just 5.6 percent of the faculty" and in 1972, of the 621 faculty members in the Graduate Center of the City University of New York only 55 were women and every department chair was a man.

²⁸ Florence Howe, *A Life in Motion* (New York: Feminist Press, 2011), p. 252; Geiger, *American Higher Education Since World War II*, p. 233, and Sarah M Pritchard, "Women's Studies Scholarship: Its Impact on the Information World," American Library Association, June 1994, <https://www.ala.org/rt/srrt/feminist-task-force/womens-studies-scholarship-impact>.

of *Women in Culture and Society*.²⁹

As women's studies scholarship, particularly women's history, moved through a succession of stages, from "compensatory" and "contribution" history to focusing on women's lives and experiences on their own terms, the anger, fury, and backlash from the discipline's patriarchy was palpable.³⁰ Women scholars were accused of politicizing and corrupting history and distorting evidence in support of feminist ideology. As Joan Wallach Scott recalls:

Those of us who challenged prevailing views . . . well remember the kind of opposition we faced when we asked who got to count as a historian, what got to count as history, and how those determinations were made. A woman historian was not just a historian with female genitals but someone who might bring different perspectives to her work. . . . Accusations from feminists of male bias were greeted as political and ideological; the men's rejection of women's history was taken as a defense of the integrity of the field.³¹

By the last quarter of the 20th century, the humanities' place in US higher education had three competing pulls: the first was a widely accepted but only sporadically supported general education agenda—a "common core" of a sort borne from a sense of American Exceptionalism at the national level and an institutional interest in shaping the spirit of young (mostly) men. The second was the rise of the professional research infrastructure that would shape the academy for decades to come, and the third was a tension between longstanding disciplinary fields and hierarchies and the challenge associated with legitimizing new methodological and interpretive perspectives.

Departments and Disciplines as Infrastructure for the Humanities

The production of specialized knowledge and the segmentation of academic disciplines during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries benefitted from the establishment of academic departments that created self-governing norms and procedures, provided intellectual community, and encouraged shared responsibility for a field of learning that could—gradually and cautiously—be expanded to incorporate new specialties and sub-fields.

²⁹ Geiger, *American Higher Education Since World War II*, p. 233.

³⁰ See Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History," *Feminist Studies*, 3:1-2 (Autumn, 1975), 5-14.

³¹ Scott, *Knowledge, Power and Academic Freedom*, pp. 50-51.

Laurence Veysey describes this growing coherence of the departmental structure in the early part of the century:

Such standardization of organizational form and style, and such homogeneity of social background and status of the membership, could easily coexist, as we have had occasion to emphasize, with intellectual specialization and insulation. This is the basic paradox embodied in Herbert Spencer's famous formula of an historical drift from "indefinite incoherent homogeneity" towards a new state of "definite coherent heterogeneity."³²

Structures organize behavior and ideas. They support professionalization; over time, departments' system-wide "coherence" became clear: they increasingly leaned on standardized hiring processes, a system of external reviews that depended upon networks that would eventually provide the clear and distinct data to feed into ratings systems for gauging the productivity and quality of scholars' work and the place of various departments in a system-wide hierarchy. Departments grew into very effective (and "coherent") containers for heterogeneous work of individual and autonomous faculty members. These structures continue to help organize the improvement and passing along of tools and methods. But they are human constructs—the world itself as a subject of study isn't divided into disciplines, though higher education as a functioning system coalesced into self-policing and self-replicating forms: "From 1920 to 1950, undergraduate enrollment increased tenfold, but graduate enrollment increased fiftyfold."³³ Graduate education was (and is) conducted exclusively by university departments in which the reliance on specialized scholarship had its strongest claim over the more generalized approach that characterizes the teaching of undergraduates. The defining norms of fields were solidly placed in the hands of the growing graduate education complex, a system-wide faculty-training mechanism in which specialized scholarship reifies the trust-claim value of the methods of particular disciplines. The *symbolic* work of departments told and reinforced the human-made story that research methods and practices that could be made manifest in specialized scholarship, recognized by peer review in the field's journal or conferences, are the practices that define a field—be it English or Philosophy or Sociology or Chemistry. At the same time, the *material* impulses of departments—the instinct of those charged with maintaining

³² Veysey, "The Plural Organized Worlds of the Humanities," in Oleson and Voss, eds., *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*, p. 68.

³³ Menand, p. 206.

institutional structures to accumulate the control of financial resources and power—led to the expanding of departmental borders and the absorption of new approaches to academic work—colloquially referred to as “turf battles” or “empire building.” In the three quarters of the 20th century when US higher education was expanding, departments’ symbolic narrowing and material widening could be reconciled. According to Menand: “departments could simply add on new interdisciplinary, post disciplinary, or essentially non disciplinary activities (like creative writing) without sacrificing staff in the traditional fields of inquiry. The Academy swallowed up almost everything in American intellectual and cultural life between 1940 and 1980 and spit out very little.”³⁴ Later, as expansion slowed, tensions between these modes became more evident.

While the working tools of assessment of humanities faculty rely on a nation-wide network of peer and departmental review, the local work of teaching and service to campus and communities cannot be carried out via the remote networks. So, the daily work of faculty and departments happens within the pulls of meaning making and interdisciplinarity that speaks to undergraduates who are—for the most part—unconcerned with professionalized scholarship. Today, fields have been established that make sense to a growing pool of students who are searching for their identities and place in the world (American studies, African American studies, Women’s studies, Queer studies). Undergraduates are also drawn to the interdisciplinary approaches to studying issues of health, the environment, or social justice that are of great concern to them. The departments, named and measured within disciplines either are drawn to absorb these interdisciplinary approaches, to work out arrangements to do the non-conforming work of team-teaching across departmental boundaries, or to reject these non-departmentally blessed approaches. Specialized humanistic scholarship thrives within the autonomy granted by departmental structures; but (as we will see in the case of Dickinson College) the humanities in the minds of undergraduates can meet students’ desires and needs when subjects of study don’t conform to the rigidity of departmental structures:

“I start,” Dickinson College History Professor Emily Pawley says when talking about the college’s Food Studies program, “with the iconic tomato. When you bring a tomato into class, the students are like, a tomato? And then you start to talk about who touched it—literally, who touched it all along its way here. Immediately, it’s not only concrete and not only a familiar object, but

³⁴ Menand, p. 206.

then they realize they don't know anything about it. That kind of step outward is very easy when you have an artifact."³⁵ The program includes dozens of courses, ranging from African American Foodways, which examines the multifarious ways in which food has influenced the expressions of African American identity and culture, to "Eating the Text: Tasting Jewish and Israeli Food Through Literature, Film, and . . . the Mouth," to the Chemistry of Nutrition, to Nutritional Anthropology, which examines "the effects of globalization and the commoditization of food on dietary choices, the health consequences of under- and over-nutrition, and the social and historical constraints on food production and consumption in different societies."³⁶ If the institutional structures of a college or university are too rigid, faculty living within departmental boundaries cannot make the time for such programs. English Professor, Siobhan Phillips, recognizes this: "You can't really do food studies without being multidisciplinary. . . . This is the kind of place where scholarship is emerging at intersections, while also respecting the integrity and methods of various disciplines. That's something we at a liberal- arts college can do really well. It's something that can happen here because of the flexibility and collegiality that we have." At Dickinson, enrollments in humanities courses are thriving, even if fewer students are committed to a strong disciplinary major. But Dickinson's humanities are being shaped by the market: Jenn Halpin, the director of the college's farm, recognizes this: "I would love for alumni to recognize that the food studies certificate is the culmination of their interests and efforts over the years. As people who have taught or advised students in these areas of interest—within anthropology, history, English, biology, chemistry—yes, it's because of those efforts that we have this new program, but if it hadn't been students expressing their interests through their course of study, we wouldn't be trying to meet that need." Each college that has the pressure and passion of undergraduates can serve as a market-driven locus of potential creativity for the humanities.

Stepping back and contextualizing the place of departments in the larger framework of this essay, we recall that they were established and granted significant autonomy within their institutions which also functioned autonomously. In this way, departments are largely shielded from direct political pressure. But they are not spared the pressure of market forces represented by students voting via their course registrations. In the pressures that they feel from students—about what they want (or don't want) from the humanities more

³⁵ https://www.dickinson.edu/news/article/2364/fertile_ground.

³⁶ https://www.dickinson.edu/homepage/849/food_studies_curriculum.

generally or what kinds of classes excite them in particular—faculty members and departments are functioning locally rather than nationally. Departments are supported in different ways at various institutions; in some contexts, the number of majors is the key determinative of departmental funding and faculty lines; in others, enrollments count more. The faculty at each institution may be attuned to these local material pressures; at others they may be swayed by symbolic interests—such as prioritizing the recruitment of majors and the design of departmental requirements in ways that are aimed at students who might follow in their own footsteps into the professorate.

Evolution of these reinforced structures doesn't always come easily, but it can happen, as seen in recent changes within what had been the Department of English at Cornell University:

In the summer of 2020, the Department of English voted to change its name to the Department of Literatures in English; In October, the University's Board of Trustees voted to approve the change. To the outside world, this might have seemed like wordplay; to some politically minded critics of higher education, it seemed like "super-woke Cornell University." But in between charges of insignificance and inappropriateness, we can see the actions of institutional change—change which does not come easily, but which makes sense for an institution responding to a changing country and a changing student body: "Faculty around the country — not just faculty of color, but faculty in general," said Prof. Carole Boyce-Davies, "began to look at the institution to see how we can help advance a discourse that challenges structural forms of racism which get reproduced in students and in teaching over and over again."³⁷ While the immediate provocation for the change was the renewal of civil rights activism through the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement after the police killing of George Floyd, "Other faculty simply recognized that it was time that the department's title represented what it was really focused on: literature written in English." The department's site notes this trend:

The last two decades have seen a steady expansion in the department's ethnic diversity, as Asian-American, American Indian, and Latino/a faculty have joined the professorial ranks. Not surprisingly, these demographic shifts have been accompanied by curricular changes as well. While canonical English and American literature continues to be taught, an increasingly prominent place in the curriculum is occupied by ethnic, indigenous, and minority literatures,

³⁷ <https://cornellsun.com/2020/10/14/english-faculty-vote-to-change-name-to-department-of-literatures-in-english/>.

post-colonial Anglophone literature, film and media studies, and queer studies.³⁸

While students, particularly undergraduates at prestigious research universities like Cornell where publications remain the dominant factor in reward systems, cannot always shape institutional change, in this case, their evolving interests were supported by an evolving faculty, and ultimately by an evolving administration as well. The change was supported by a letter from the University's president, a signal which aligned institutional response to bottom-up pressure from the marketplace of students who were finding their literary curiosity piqued by more than only the British literary tradition.

"[The message] was a big help in making us feel like this was an important part of a larger collective action," department chair Prof. Caroline Levine said. "Sometimes when a department tries to do something like this in isolation, there's concerns about whether or not people will recognize and respect it. When it comes from the top, there is a sense that this is something that the whole institution should be doing in some part and it makes it easy to rally around it."³⁹

Given the seeming modesty of the change—a few words that sound very similar to most ears—this episode could be seen as insignificant. But it is meaningful that an Ivy League university with a long tradition of designing its material reward structures around the expertise denoted by specialized (and often theoretical) publications can be responsive to the changing times and needs of students. "It is a desire to find a way," Prof. Boyce-Davies wrote elsewhere, "and definitely a search for language in this Eurocentric context in which we work, to live more fully so that all have a sense of belonging in whatever field we work in, whichever country we inhabit. . . . Let us say instead that rather than claiming firsts, these are all unfinished decolonizing projects, still continuing even in 2020 in the United States, the Caribbean and everywhere settler colonialism took place, or where indigenous genocide, slavery, and racial capitalism continue to mark these landscapes and their institutions."⁴⁰

³⁸ <https://cornellsun.com/2020/10/14/english-faculty-vote-to-change-name-to-department-of-literatures-in-english/>.

³⁹ <https://cornellsun.com/2020/10/14/english-faculty-vote-to-change-name-to-department-of-literatures-in-english/>.

⁴⁰ Carole Boyce Davies, "Letter to the Editor: Re: 'Deconstructing Cornell's 'Literatures in English' Fiction'" *The Cornell Daily Sun*, December 14, 2020. <https://cornellsun.com/2020/12/14/letter-to-the-editor-re-deconstructing-cornells-literatures-in-english-fiction/>.

Evolution of departments and innovation in teaching and scholarship follows in a loop with each faculty member's interaction with a diversity of students at each institution. These local experiments, some of which will reflect the gradual evolution of a field, others of which will build particular initiatives that may spur the creation of entirely new interdisciplinary undertakings.

The Woven Structure of the Humanities in American Higher Education

Looking back over the 150-year formation of the vertically organized colleges and universities—with each institution inclined to address its own needs in isolation and in competition with others, it is worth also recognizing that various kinds of infrastructure have been created. As professionalization of scholarship solidified the place of scholars in the academy, various concomitant infrastructures received significant foundational investments. Infrastructure was built at individual campuses to support the work of those scholars. Libraries were created to collect and care for the primary source materials that were deemed important for humanistic study and the secondary materials that scholars produced (and consumed). Professionalized faculty within departments organized themselves into social infrastructure: horizontal communities that shape the norms for fields and disciplines were formed and cut across the walls that separate universities. These communities organized the conferences, the fellowship support, and publishing opportunities that provide scholars mechanisms for professional advancement. And then, as a connective infrastructure through which scholarship could flow, universities created presses to publish both books and journals to publish the primary indicators of professional accomplishment. “Virtually all of the essential elements of this system,” Louis Menand writes, “were introduced between 1870 and 1915; developments since 1915 have served chiefly to reinforce the design of the original model.”⁴¹ As context for how these defining structures are adapting to shape the humanities of today or how new structures are needed, we need a basic understanding how these essential and longstanding elements were originally designed.

Infrastructure comes in many shapes and forms. As colleges and universities settled into somewhat regular forms in the first half of the 20th century—with

⁴¹ Louis Menand, “The Demise of Disciplinary Authority.”

a fairly consistent set of departments—and as the measures of what constituted professional accomplishment in those departments were more or less agreed upon in various strata of the sector, supporting infrastructures were established: Scholarly disciplines which had been developing communities in the US since just after the Civil War (the American Philological Association, now renamed the Society for Classical Studies, was formed in 1869 for “professors, friends, and patrons of linguistic science,”) assumed the function of stewarding the norms of the field, or in the case of fields that were trying to elbow their way into the curriculum, the locus for validating what deserved study and what constituted expertise in the field, such that colleges and universities could distinguish who was worthy of being considered an expert that academic freedom was supposed to protect. While associations formed the trans-institutional infrastructure for defining and defending norms within fields of study, other, more tangible sub-organizations were needed in order to support the work of scholars and teachers. While laboratories were needed in the physical sciences, the professionalization of the humanities required libraries. Creating libraries also necessitated developing policies for collecting primary and secondary materials. The opportunities to make manifest the now professionalized knowledge of humanities scholars led individual universities to create presses to develop and publish the books that were seen as the most significant contribution that humanistic scholars might—and for the sake of professional advancement, had to—make.

On individual campuses, these various structures functioned as institutions in their own right and then collectively across the sector, they formed another set of trans-institutional institutions. Organizational theorists define institutions as value-shaping communities that surround and enfold individuals. Sociologists Roger Friedland and Robert R. Alford conceive of institutions as “both supra-organizational patterns of activity through which humans conduct their material life in time and space, and symbolic systems through which they categorize that activity and infuse it with meaning.”⁴² While serving as part of their institutional home, the library at the University of Michigan, the Comparative Literature Department at Berkeley, or the University of Minnesota Press each provide those who work within these institutions in their own right with both material and symbolic responsibilities and hopes. In turn, those local institutions

⁴² Friedland, Roger, and Robert Alford. “Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions.” *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (1991): 232–266.

help shape and are shaped by trans institutional institutions such as the American Research Libraries (ARL), the Modern Language Association (MLA), or the Association of University Presses (AUPresses). Through decades of material and symbolic activities, these local and collective institutions set structures in place to guide and legitimate the work of their times. As institutions, separate and together, they endured—as institutions tend to do, resilient against changes that might threaten to decrease denizens’ material and symbolic well-being. The local institutions were advanced in competition with each other; the national filaments which connected the sub-institutions bound them together tightly even as they normally saw each other as competitors. As pillars of the academic humanities, these various vertical and horizontal institutions were woven together to create a resilient set of intertwined structures, remarkable for their capacity to endure.

In the next section—and as a way of surveying the new directions in the humanities in the US—we turn to asking about whether and how these longstanding and change-resistant institutions have been able to adapt as student populations and the capacities of available technology have changed in the post war period and increasingly over the last quarter of the 20th and the first quarter of the 21st century.

Learned Societies

Concomitant with the development of the university-based departmental structures in which faculty would exercise their autonomy within the boundaries of their responsibilities to their employer, nascent communities of practice that stretched horizontally across the various colleges and universities also came into a new stage of being. Amateur scholars and college teachers who shared interests in Asian languages had been gathering since at least the founding of the American Oriental Society in 1842 or its offshoot devoted to Roman and Greek (the American Philological Association) in 1869. But the clarification of the campus-based structures that would govern the material practices of teachers and scholars in the period leading up to World War I also resulted in a clarification of the role and function of these organizations. Together, the departments and the disciplinary societies in the humanities would weave, together, a fabric that defined boundaries around academic fields. This inter-institutional weave would—in an unusually American structure --largely autonomous departments in the vertical axis and autonomous disciplinary communities on the horizontal axis—within which a great deal of intellectual

freedom and internally managed functions would roam with very little interference from the outside. In the 19th century, universities were small and unstructured and the institution's president would, in many cases, hire faculty by themselves. At the beginning of the 20th century, universities had grown, the age of strong presidents who had passed, and while there loomed the possibility of outside influence of foundations such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, unified institutional management of academic affairs (in the humanities and elsewhere) yielded to what amounted to an agreement for departmental Home Rule. We have seen how this was established within colleges and universities. In this section, we review the function of cross-cutting communities that established—and governed—the norms which came to be accepted as the guarantors needed to patrol the now-accepted idea of academic freedom.

In the early 20th century, societies defined the groups of legitimate peers who could justify the creation of autonomous zones within which scholars had room to intellectually roam. With all things related to Greece and Rome now segregated to a department called Classics, the study of English was being defined by the Modern Language Association. The sprawling territory of world history was being defined and legitimized by the American Historical Association. These and other democratically organized societies created what are still seen today as leading peer reviewed journals; conferences were held both for presenting and keeping up with the most recent scholarship. As a spillover of meetings created as a locus for presenting current scholarship, networks were built and strengthened. The societies both defined for the departments what was legitimate and could—sometime begrudgingly—evolve those standards (as Joan Scott notes):

Disciplinary communities provide the consensus necessary to justify academic freedom as a special freedom for faculty. But the inseparable other side of this regulatory and enabling authority is that it can suppress innovative thinking in the name of defending immutable standards. Paradoxically, the very institutions that are meant to legitimize faculty autonomy can also function to undermine it.⁴³

If the universities as industrial organizations—the factories that carried out the semi-commercially organized production of students into graduates—took on the oversight of the material functions in the humanities (and other fields),

⁴³ Scott, p. 52.

academic societies emerged as the collective managers of the symbolic narrative contours of a discipline.

In the early 20th century construction of a professionalized and credentialed inter-institutional infrastructure, humanities fields emerged with a relevant and what would turn out to be resilient set of measures for defining productivity in the discipline: the book and (to a somewhat lesser degree) the journal article. In later sections, we will consider the infrastructure that supports the production of these measurable artifacts; but first we turn towards how disciplinary communities can work to adapt even with the contradictory conservative functions that Joan Scott notes. Then we will consider the question of breaching of walls. As we saw in the section on departments, interdisciplinary models—such as interdepartmental programs like Dickinson College’s Food Studies major—appeal to the undercurrent of generalist interest that pulls against the strong boundaries of specialization (upheld by departments). How do disciplinary societies adapt to changing times? And do interdisciplinary societies offer an alternative to the difficult work of change within disciplines?

Evolution within Longstanding Disciplinary Societies

In the previous section, we traced one story of how Cornell University’s English Department worked within existing boundaries to change the message that it sent to students about what kind of work the department conducted and conveyed to students. While much of the pressure to generalize rather than specialize comes from student interest, the student voices only occasionally build enough momentum to shift the course of a particular humanities department. The faculty, in their roles as managers of their own autonomous region, are the ones who can do so. The same is true when the practices or even the definition of a discipline is questioned.

The dynamics of disciplinary societies reflect what sociologists refer to as “the paradox of embedded agency”: those who are in dominant positions or leadership positions within a social structure have little incentive to change the rules of the game that led to their dominance while those who seek to change those rules lack the power to do so. Since 2000, the largest of the disciplinary societies (the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association) have sought to resolve the paradox by adaptation of their disciplines to the realities of scholars, scholarship, and departmental realities of today:

- **Norm Setting around Career Diversity for Humanistic PhDs.** After a significant time of replenishing the faculties of English and History

departments after retirements in the early 2000s, opportunities for new tenure-track roles slowed after the economic crisis of 2008–2009. Decreases in the number of undergraduate humanities majors led colleges and universities to feel that they couldn't justify many new hires. As a result, the opportunities for academic roles for students emerging from graduate school with PhDs were limited. Recognizing that their commitment was to all in the field (and not just those who gained the increasingly rare tenure-track jobs), MLA and AHA launched significant efforts to shift the culture around preparing graduate students for the diversity of careers—in and out of the academy—that they were likely to face. The MLA's [Connected Academics](#) programs and AHA's work with individual departments were both supported by the Mellon Foundation. In the fall of 2011, AHA President Anthony Grafton and Executive Director Jim Grossman published “No More Plan B: A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History” in *Perspectives on History* and in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Grafton and Grossman challenged history PhD programs to reconsider their response to the longstanding pressures on the academic job market: “it was time to change our definition of success, time to reconsider the career horizons of our PhD recipients. Rather than focusing exclusively on reproducing the professoriate, departments might encourage students to think expansively about career options and develop curricular and cultural programming to support that broader exploration of careers.”⁴⁴

- **Norm Setting around Digital and Other Formats of Scholarship.** Promotion and Tenure guidelines for digital scholarship emerged in the early 2000s as a creative force for changing the nature of humanities scholarship: “Faculty members in humanities disciplines have been pioneers in many forms of digital scholarship and teaching,” wrote Scott Jaschik in *Inside Higher Ed*, “but many have complained for years that some of their departments don't have a clue how to evaluate such work, and that some senior scholars are downright hostile to it.” In 2012, the Modern Language Association released its *Guidelines for Evaluating Work in Digital Humanities and Digital Media* and a revised and

⁴⁴ Grafton, Anthony, and James R. Grossman, “No More Plan B; A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History” in *Perspectives on History*: October 1, 2011. <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/no-more-plan-b-a-very-modest-proposal-for-graduate-programs-in-history-october-2011/>.

expanded document in 2024, “designed to help departments and faculty members implement effective evaluation procedures for hiring, reappointment, tenure, and promotion.” Society-sanctioned guidelines have not magically overwritten the existing standards and reward structures within departments, but they are likely, over time, to play a role in changing the system from within. In 2023, the AHA released new “Guidelines for Broadening the Definition of Historical Scholarship” that urged recognition of any vehicle for scholarship, including congressional testimony, podcasts, or op-ed pieces, so long as they could undergo post-hoc review.

- **Norm Setting around Publicly Engaged Scholarship.** In 2017, the AHA issued a statement about publicly engaged scholarship: The American Historical Association’s Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct defines scholarship as a process, not a product, an understanding now common in the profession. The scholarly work of public historians involves the advancement, integration, application, and transformation of knowledge. It differs from “traditional” historical research not in method or in rigor but in the venues in which it is presented and in the collaborative nature of its creation.

Shifting participation and recognition structures is challenging enough while bending a discipline within the existing structures. The bigger challenge comes when, after years of attempted intellectual shifting of a field, a challenge is issued about the fundamental intellectual framework established during the construction of the structure in the first place.

In the field of music theory, Professor Phil Ewell’s 2019 keynote presentation at the Society for Music Theory’s annual conference reverberated across the field. Titled “Music Theory’s White Racial Frame,” Ewell’s talk preceded the renewed introspection concerning institutional racism that would arise among many academics in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd by police in 2020.⁴⁵ In his talk, Ewell highlighted the explicit racism of foundational German music theorist Heinrich Schenker, often considered “the most influential and original music theorist of the twentieth century.”⁴⁶ Ewell also took issue

⁴⁵ Ewell, “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame.” Professor Ewell’s argument is expanded in Philip Ewell, *On Music Theory, and Making Music More Welcoming for Everyone*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023).

⁴⁶ Botstein, “Schenker the Regressive: Observations on the Historical Schenker.”

with how subsequent theorists had gone out of their way to argue that Schenker's racism had nothing to do with his music theory. A classically trained cellist and scholar of Russian classical music, Ewell had decided that continued gracious but marginal critique was insufficient. Comparing Schenker's racist political writings with his music theory, he argued that Whiteness pervades a racialized structure of music scholarship: The ideas of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German scholars, including Schenker, have defined what music "counts" as excellent and defined the criteria for determining excellence and excluding most of the rest of the world's music. These scholars' racism was not a side-course; it was a defining ingredient in the main course of their work. And, Ewell argued, the symbolic narrative of the field played out in material realities.

"On the one hand," Ewell noted, "music theory, as a field, states that it supports diversity and inclusivity, and with it one presumes racial diversity and inclusivity. But on the other hand, 98.3% of the music that we choose to represent the entire field to our undergraduate students in our textbooks is written by composers who are white."⁴⁷ As Ewell notes, attempts to adapt the field to align with today's societal and student populations have basically failed. Without changing the frame of what constitutes music worthy of study, he argues, the field has basically said that visitors are welcome, as long as they come to the existing institutional structure and play the game on existing institutional terms. Changing academic and intellectual structures is hard enough as a battle of values and symbols; it is so much harder within change-resistant structures where faculty see their livelihood being challenged by the possible restructuring of departments, curricula, and requirements that is an essential part of remedying a 100-year-old imbalance that was designed to exclude most of the world's music. The work of recognizing the White and established Euro-centric frame of many fields continues, but slowly. As Joan Scott noted, the disciplines that legitimize also must repel the new.

The effort provoked by Ewell's challenge continues—in music theory and most of the other disciplines (and, in practical terms, in the work of the disciplinary societies). Revisiting the intellectual frameworks of fields and challenging the foundational schema of disciplines largely defined in the US by frameworks established in western European universities or by European national borders represents challenging work. This work continues within

⁴⁷ Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame." Ishida, "5 Questions to Philip Ewell."

societies, due to evolving values of evolving membership, to the recognition that PhD students of today are facing a very different set of opportunities after 50 years of contraction of higher education, and to a growing generation of emerging scholars with the long-deferred opportunity to enter and re-define the disciplines.

The norm setting role of disciplinary societies was solidified into a legitimacy granting community. Professionalization led to specialization which has, in the academic humanities, been seen in opposition to general approaches to humanistic knowledge since Dewey, who wrote that “scholastic specialization and the departmentalization of knowledge breed indifference to larger social issues and objects.”⁴⁸ The humanities have proven to be particularly reliant on the artifacts of existing departmental boundaries to maintain the legitimacy of their disciplines in ways that other fields were perhaps more able to adapt. Historian James Turner notes how the sciences have had far more capacity to create (and over time) un-create categories of inquiry that crash through disciplinary fences:

Natural scientists have in the past proved far nimbler than humanists in adapting disciplinary boundaries to emerging problems. Life scientists reorganize themselves, as research agenda develops, into units that come and go: microbiology, molecular biology, biochemistry, biophysics, biomedical informatics, neurosciences, behavioral biology. Any acolyte of the laboratory can chant a litany of cross-bred scientific programs: astrophysics, earth and planetary sciences, geophysics, biogeochemistry, biological engineering. Meanwhile, English and History departments soldier stolidly on, muskets on their shoulders.⁴⁹

But the approaches to the humanities that don't rest contentedly within disciplines—or departments—also have strong and continuing pulls—both for arousing the less specialized impulses of undergraduates and the inclination for boundary crossing among scholars emerging from specific training in traditional disciplines. In considering the history of one such society, The Renaissance Society of America, we can learn about one model of a variant

⁴⁸ John Dewey, cited in Stanley Katz, *John Dewey and the Idea of General Education in the 21st Century*.

https://snkatz.scholar.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf3251/files/snkatz/files/huntington-publishable-draft_7-1-09.pdf.

⁴⁹ James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities*, Princeton University Press: 2015.

community that lives in between the clarity of vertically ordered departments and horizontally ordered disciplinary societies, and how it evolves over time within the more porous walls that define its community.

The Renaissance Society of America

Period-based and discipline-unbound interest in the Renaissance predates the creation of US university-based departments. The inclination towards studying the period with at least partial disregard for the disciplinary boundaries that defined academic departments has a long history in the US. As part of the “usable past” impulse inspired by the Great Books curriculum that was created in US universities during and after World War I, the Renaissance (argues historian Ed Muir) had its special place: “for Americans who had been suddenly jerked out of their provincial isolation by the events of the twentieth century. . . . In the great drama of Western Civilization, the Italian Renaissance formed Scene One of the turbulent Act Three, “The Modern World,” which reached its climactic and final moment with the United States as the dominant world power.” The study of the Renaissance in the US thrived with the arrival of emigre scholars from Europe before and during WWII. Central European emigres who found a refuge in America during the 1930s and 1940s added to the mythos of continuity between the classical world and US democracy:

Their students, including J.G.A Pocock filled out the connection between the city states of early modern Europe and the supposed fulfillment of renaissance humanism in US democracy: . . . a republican version of history, which has been composed around a series of luminous moments from ancient Athens through the Renaissance city-states, to the English civil war, and finally to the revolutionary American and French republics.⁵⁰

In 1954, a number of these emigres, led by Paul Oskar Kristellar, created the Renaissance Society of America; they wrote: “The purpose of this society shall be the advancement of learning in the field of Renaissance Studies, and especially the promotion of interchanges among the various fields of specialization.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Edward Muir, “The Italian Renaissance in America,” *The American Historical Review*, 100:4 (1995), 1095–1118.

⁵¹ Christopher Carlsmith, “Diamond Jubilee: A History of the New England Renaissance Conference, 1939–2014,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 11 (2014), 191–252; “The Renaissance Society of America. An Account by the Executive Board,” *Renaissance News* 7 (1954), 7–11.

On the one hand, the Renaissance society encapsulated the most traditional of the Eurocentric, elite, and White circles of Whig history—drawing upon or creating a sense of the inevitable march of European progress that culminated in American democracy. It drew upon (and attracted) those who celebrated the Burkhardtian rise of modern political and economic structures or who were enraptured by the artistic and literary creations that were fostered in that period. On the other hand, the Renaissance Society had boundary breaking in its mission. It didn't pay heed to the national lines that separated modern nations of Europe or the isolation of fields, recognizing on some level that disciplines such as history, literature, philosophy, religious studies, the history of science or the history of art were constructs of the 20th century university. But even with this foundationally interdisciplinary license, the study of the Renaissance in the US for much of the 20th century was largely seen as the domain of a triumphant Eurocentric homogeneity.

These dominant strains came under stress as society's norms evolved: books like James Saslow's *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society*, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worm*, and (in 1995) Walter Mignolo's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* introduced challenges to the celebratory narrative of a Renaissance that they argued could not be considered as un-connected to the rise of colonialism that accompanied the "age of exploration." In re-framing the Renaissance or the early modern period's "darker side," Mignolo "underlined, instead the rebirth of the classical tradition as a justification of colonial expansion and the emergence of a genealogy (the early colonial period) that announces the colonial and the postcolonial." Understanding the intergenerational shifts in an interdisciplinary community like the Renaissance Society can help us understand how a field evolves intergenerationally in the context of the country's increasingly diverse student and faculty demographics.

In the last thirty years, the walls around the Renaissance have become increasingly porous as its intentionally interdisciplinary reach found interested parties in departments of Spanish and Portuguese, Atlantic Studies, African Studies, Asian Studies—scholarly domains where the triumph of the West was no longer a given. Ricardo Padron, Professor of Spanish at the University of Virginia and a member of the Renaissance Society of America's board describes how the Society began to dig deeper into the pragmatic implications for the community of re-framing the Renaissance:

During the summer of 2020, the Renaissance Society of America (RSA) embarked upon an effort to address its shortcomings surrounding issues of

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Founded in 1954, the RSA is the world's largest professional association devoted to the study of what was once called "the Renaissance," but is now more commonly referred to as "the early modern period," spanning roughly from 1300 to 1700. The demographics of the RSA's membership reflects that of these fields: it is overwhelmingly white identifying. The particular subfields that feature most prominently in both the conference and the journal, moreover, give pride of place not only to Europe but to those parts of Europe associated with traditional notions of the Renaissance as an elite cultural movement, Italy and England primarily. Overall, the society is perceived as white and elitist. The effort initiated by the RSA's Board of Directors proposed to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion both at the level of its membership and of its scholarly activities.

The decisive pivot toward issues of racial justice that took hold of American culture in the wake of George Floyd's murder by the Minneapolis Police lent a new sense of urgency to these efforts. The Board of Directors felt the time had come for a more concerted, targeted approach to institutional change, but knew that, as a predominantly white-identifying group drawn from the core membership of the RSA, it needed guidance from others in order to make change happen. The Board thus appointed a "Working Group for Diversity and Equity" (WGDE), tasked with gathering input from a broad range of constituents about any and all relevant matters. The WGDE organized a series of online workshops that would serve as fora for interested individuals to discuss the society's shortcomings around DEI, and to make suggestions for how it should change. Once the workshops were completed, the WGDE collectively authored a forty-page report that distilled the lessons it had learned. The WGDE was able to shape the arguments of the workshop participants into practicable action items without silencing the voices of the participants themselves. The RSA Board of Directors has acted on the highest priority recommendation of the report by creating the position of "Chair of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," modeled on the diversity officers that have become part of the landscape of many American universities. The society's fellowship program has been redirected to favor early career scholars and people in precarious professional appointments.

If the report of the WGDE can be said to have an overarching theme, it is this: in order to make significant progress on matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the RSA cannot continue to adapt its institutions and practices in an ad hoc, additive manner. People from minoritized populations simply will not

be interested in passing through the door, at least not in significant numbers, unless the space itself is radically altered. In the case of the RSA, this means bringing scholars from minoritized groups into the society's governing structure, transforming the disciplinary groups that form the basis of the society's organization, expanding the range of topics covered by the journal, and much else besides. These are changes that take time, and they will inevitably meet resistance, not only from individuals suspicious about diversity issues in general, but also from well-meaning people who simply do not want to give something up that they deem valuable.

Many scholars committed to a traditional definition of the Renaissance are not willing to entertain the possibility that the very notion of the Renaissance could be saturated in racism, sexism, and ableism, and that the diversification of the field of Renaissance studies might not be possible without reconsidering some of its most cherished received notions. Renaissance studies, with its marked tendency to monumentalize the people and ideas of the period it studies, cannot pretend to stand outside our current historical moment, which is so invested in dispelling the myths and toppling the statues of a white supremacist past that continues to shape our present. Nor should it. On the contrary, Renaissance studies should assume its place among those fields that are effectively. In recreating the field in light of the new honesty surrounding the history of racism, sexism, ableism and other forms of oppression, it will only be following the lead of those scholars whose work actively demonstrates how relevant the study of the early modern period is to our own day—a form of Renaissance studies worthy of students, public interest, and support.

As study of the early modern period expands its lenses, departmental boundaries will not be the only barriers to new scholarship. Learning the European languages required to study the period has set a high hurdle for scholars to clear; the prospect of needing to learn the languages of peoples in other parts of the world where Europeans roamed in addition to the European languages will be close to impossible for most scholars. Collaboration between scholars has long been looked upon with suspicion by promotion and tenure committees in the humanities, but this too is another issue where norms will need to evolve.

The Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA)

Time periods are not the only subject of humanistic inquiry that resist the boxes formed by departments. In the early 2000s, a group of scholars working on various aspects of North American indigenous culture decided to gather; as one

of the founders of the Native American Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA), University of Kansas professor Robert Warrior, recounts, they were surprised to see how many people showed up. “We thought we’d have a meeting of 75 people in Oklahoma in 2007 to talk about what it would be like to have an association and ended up having 300 people at the meeting.” By the time of the last NAISA conference held before the COVID 19 pandemic, 2000 scholars gathered in New Zealand. Warrior, who had experience with scholarly societies, having served as the president of the American Studies Association at one point, noted that societies provide more than norm setting: “the exciting thing for me is that it creates the sort of intellectual currency. to see something actually be useful to people in their careers, but also in their own development, as thinkers as scholars . . . it seems like when you can answer a question like . . . where am I going to find an intellectual home? You know, it’s right over here.”⁵²

Warrior goes on to reflect on his perspective as a person and as a scholar: “I am a Wazhazhe or Osage scholar who practices a North American version of global Indigenous studies.” The point is: societies are evolving to create fields across fields, providing an intellectual home that creates fields of study that have not been established, structured, or materially supported in the early 20th century creation of humanities departments. Approaching humanistic materials and questions in this way appeals to students and to society at large, even if they pull against specialization or withdrawal into a realm of abstract contemplation. “How can one study indigenous culture,” Robert Warrior asks, “and NOT refer to the contemporary status of people?”

Libraries, Presses, and Philanthropy as Infrastructure for the Humanities

We have explored how individual institutions, loosely connected by norms and competing with each other across the landscape of US institutions developed as isolated locations for experimentation. With only modest government and state pressures upon them, institutions of higher education formed and hardened the structures that create spaces for individualized campus humanities programs. Colleges and universities built up their own locally based capacity to enable

⁵² Robert Warrior, “2010 NAISA Presidential Address: Practicing Native American and Indigenous Studies.” *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, vol. 1 no. 1, 2014, p. 3–24. *Project MUSE*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/nai.2014.a843654>.

undergraduates to major in newly formed departments and for faculty to participate in the emerging network of professional scholarship in their disciplinary communities. To do all of this work, each institution had to support another newly professionalized sub-institution that would support these efforts: the library.

Before the professionalization of faculty of colleges and universities in the first part of the 20th century, college libraries were relatively insignificant undertakings. As faculty organized into an industrialized model of departments that standardized the practices of professionalization around how they were hired and advanced, the central activities of the library were also standardized to accommodate the activities of colleges and universities:

- Librarians embarked on ambitious efforts at collecting books in all fields that they would be needed for the sake of both scholars and students;
- They took on the role of absorbing and integrating the steady flows of journal literature that enable scholars to stay current in their scholarship;
- They gathered and stewarded special collections, the unique primary source material that serve as a basis for scholarly research;
- In addition to these collecting functions, librarianship also articulated an ethos of newly professionalized services which necessitated the development of the library professional by means of the training and the mission to be useful to faculty and students.

These functions were undertaken in greater or lesser degrees *at every one of the thousands of colleges and universities that were created*. After tracing how—and why—these functions developed in support of the humanities, we will turn to how they have adapted these functions to the world of the 21st century.

Libraries as Collectors and Librarians Being “Useful”

You drive for miles across a godforsaken Midwestern scrubscape, pockmarked by billboards, Motel 6s and a military parade of food chains, when—like some pedagogical mirage dreamed up by a nineteenth-century English gentleman—there appears . . . a library! And not just any library: at Bloomington, the University of Indiana [sic] boasts a 7.8 million-volume collection in more than nine hundred languages, housed in a magnificent double-towered mausoleum of Indiana limestone.

—Tony Judt⁵³

⁵³ Judt, cited by White, Andrew. D. “The Relations of the National and State Governments to

Books

With the early 20th century professionalization of the humanities, the library's accumulation of books—the longform argument mode which is unusually central to the humanities as compared with other fields—became a central focus. Beyond serving as a resource for undergraduates, books functioned as a necessary component of the work of humanities scholars. Humanistic scholars in colleges and universities used books to create other books; to make this system work, universities had to support both the creation of the books and the consumption of them. While over time, the libraries would need to stretch to accommodate the ever-expanding bound volumes of periodical literature, from the beginning of the early 20th century, they were built to accommodate lots of books.

In the core of the Butler library at Columbia University, 15 floors of steel bookcases are stacked. Roughly 1.5 million books related to the humanities, containing perhaps 135 billion words rest in those well-wrought, industrial age iron and steel constructions. Libraries could not foresee digitization, of course, so they built libraries as containers for an arms race of book buying. At the end of World War II, facing the realization that the books that they would want actually were being generated globally in ever larger numbers, libraries sought (via an attempt at collaboration known as *The Farmington Plan*) to purchase non-US books collaboratively. But their competitive instincts and adherence to local demands won out over systemic action. They created the practice of inter-library loan to address the realization that no library could have everything; but even with this recognition, academic libraries set up to build their reputation by having as many books as they could. Local imperatives largely determined the actions of individual libraries well into the era of digitization—when the realities of collecting would change fundamentally.

Journals

Books were both produced and needed for scholarship across the humanities. But these structures that organized professional scholars' lives also required other enabling infrastructures, since, as sociologist Edward Shils noted, the legitimacy of one's claim to professional standing depended upon regular access to a vast amount of printed material, material that needed regular refreshing in

Advanced Education,” in *The Rise of The Research University*. editors: Louis Menand, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon. University of Chicago Press, 2017: 203.

order to be current: “The specialized academic was in regular contact with his specialized colleagues and he was expected to demonstrate both a detailed mastery of numerous minute details and an acquaintance with larger number of publications dealing with those details.”⁵⁴ As early 20th century academic departmental structures standardized the hiring and rewarding of scholars based on their specialized research output, national societies set up conferences at which scholars could present new research and peer-reviewed journals where the newest scholarship could be disseminated widely.

The journal infrastructure for all academic fields has multiplied significantly over time, both for the stated aim (of disseminating scholarship) and the increasingly central heuristic aim of providing scholars with evidence of productivity for their professional advancement. As publisher David Crotty writes, “The society is meant to bring together and support its research community, to promote the study of the subject it represents and drive funding where available, and to guide and protect the integrity of that research. Publishing a journal is a natural extension of that mission, putting the members’ expertise to use in a high-quality peer review process to help improve and expose the latest research results. Society journals are sometimes started to foster communities of research. They are often not just ‘a journal’ but the outlet for that community of research and its members working on advancing a particular field.” As the 20th century progressed and publishing became more complicated, many societies seconded aspects of publishing—including the sales to libraries—to larger non-profit or for-profit publishers.

Moving the mechanics of publishing into the hands of publishers (while retaining the editorial process) made economic sense to humanistic societies. But the resulting processes began to feel more commercial to the libraries who were the major buyers. As Librarian Walter Crawford tweeted, “I think it’s fair to say that at least some library people (me, for example) are very much opposed to overpriced subscriptions being used as cash cows to run societies—essentially forcing libraries to subsidize the society’s activities.”⁵⁵ Journals proliferated as scholars sought outlets for their work (and opportunities for much-needed publishing achievements).

By the end of the 20th century, the growth of higher education grew or retrenched in bursts, but the need for publication as a means of gauging scholarship had been established as the coin of the realm and so journal literature was

⁵⁴ Shils, p 32.

⁵⁵ <https://twitter.com/waltcrawford/status/1062406770222542848>.

needed, even if it became increasingly difficult for libraries to be able to buy, store, and circulate the ever-growing corpus of journal literature.

Primary Sources

While the vast majority of library collecting focused on books and journals, the collecting of primary sources also became a place of librarians' added value to the humanities. While trips to archives in Europe (and eventually around the world) remained central to certain fields or certain types of scholarship, the work of scholars also increasingly relied upon libraries' compilation of source material. Library collecting expanded beyond rare books to the raw material of scholarship as the mid-20th century growth of higher education spurred the library's role in assembling all kinds of evidence. As the century proceeded and scholars began to widen their scope of materials worthy of research, the collecting impulse grew accordingly. As NYU Dean of Libraries Emerita, Carol Mandel, notes, over the latter part of the 20th century, the collection of primary source material became a race without end: "Content once considered outside the canon for serious study became the primary source documents essential for new literary and cultural studies, from dime novels to restaurant menus."

While the earliest movements to create academic libraries focused on the building of enormous physical book repositories such as the Butler or Widener libraries, the Carnegie Corporation in its mode as provocateurs of standardization soon turned to supporting the professionalization of those who would facilitate the use of the library: "After . . . [World War I], a series of studies revealed the need, among others, for more well-trained professional librarians of general competence, for an effective central organization, and for better library schools. In an effort to meet these needs, the corporation made large general grants in 1926, covering a ten-year period, to stabilize the American Library Association and to establish library schools of high academic standing."⁵⁶ Services became embedded in the training of librarians and the missions of libraries. When, as the 20th century came to a close, the nature of *collecting* began to fundamentally change, the evolution of the service functions of libraries and librarians came to the forefront.

⁵⁶ Carol Mandel, "Can We Do More? An Examination of Potential Roles, Contributors, Incentives, and Frameworks to Sustain Large-Scale Digital Preservation." Council on Library Resources: September 2019. <https://clir.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2021/03/Mandel-Chap-1.pdf>.

The Collection Building of Today

As we have noted, each campus had its library—with books and journals (for students and for faculty as both creators and consumers) and growing primary source materials that humanists needed for the creation of the scholarship that marked academic humanities as a profession. Butler Library and thousands of others still stand in the middle of campuses. But so much about libraries has changed—changed because digital technologies fundamentally pierce the walls of the campus and the library. “Along came Google,” as one recent book on the mass digitization movement notes. To understand the state of humanities scholarship in the US in the first half of the 21st century, it’s fascinating to locate what has changed in the central functions of the structures that were created 100 years ago. What humanists study and offer classes in is evolving within the experimental liberal arts innovative race across thousands of institutions; the supporting infrastructures are also—more or less—adapting.

Carol Mandel, bluntly assesses the effects of digital transformation: “Libraries don’t collect any more.”⁵⁷ A century earlier, when the breadth and depth of collections earned bragging rights and universities competed in building expansive cathedral-like buildings and providing the material and human resources to house and maintain their growing collections, such an observation would have been considered blasphemous. As we have seen, the secularization and specialization of disciplinary knowledge, professionalization of scholarship, and the proliferation of journals as a means of gaining professional credentials as much as to disseminate knowledge had transformed American higher education in the first half of the 20th century.⁵⁸ Infrastructure to support this activity was supported by societal investment in higher education through most of the 20th century. In an age of printed material, libraries acquired and stored journals and books; today they are increasingly reliant on subscription-based access to digital versions of publications. The creation of JSTOR (in the 1990s) proved the value to users of a searchable backfile of journals; publishers soon followed with mechanisms for providing institutional access to current journal

⁵⁷ Carol Mandel, “Can We Do More? An Examination of Potential Roles, Contributors, Incentives, and Frameworks to Sustain Large-Scale Digital Preservation.” Council on Library Resources, 2019. <https://clir.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2021/03/Mandel-Chap-1.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Katy B. Mathews, “Ushering in the Era of Expansion: Academic Libraries Supporting Change in American Higher Education,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 110:3, The Past, Present, and Future of Libraries (2022), pp. 75–91 and Dale Gyure, “The Heart of the University: A History of the Library as an Architectural Symbol of American Higher Education,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, 42:2–3 (Summer/Autumn, 2008), 107–132.

literature, and electronic versions of books gradually joined journals in the digital distribution channels. Google stepped into the legally complex world of mass book digitization, resulting in a number of lawsuits and the wise creation of a non-profit shadow archive (HathiTrust) which proved to be incredibly valuable when released more widely during the COVID 19 pandemic. The core function of libraries—collecting—evolved into a never-ending series of both figuring out content rental contracts and a budget-balancing act amidst a torrent of new products—many of them of value to some campus constituency or another—that were created by suppliers to take advantage of the internet’s capacity to sell and deliver content.

The rules and interconnected practices of local and shared libraries are stretched by the modes and volume of new material that is recognized as evidence for scholarship. Digital methods change the rules of the game of collection creation across the spectrum in ways that no individual library can possibly hope to address. The technology of content creation and content curation have changed, much faster than the structures of libraries have adapted to new needs. And when the subject matter has earned its place in scholarship before it has earned its place in an institution’s canon-based collections strategy, adventurous humanists have set out on their own.

The Digital Transgender Archive and Documenting the Now

Several groundbreaking Digital Humanities projects, such as the Women Writers Project (founded in 1986), the Valley of the Shadow (launched in 1993), and the William Blake Archive (launched in 1996), use digital archives to provide access to cultural materials, often with the aim of enhancing textual analysis through digital methods. What these projects also offer, both then and now, are models for democratizing knowledge through digital collection development and public dissemination. Yet digital archives and historically-inclined digital projects are not only democratizing access to historical materials, they are also calling into question traditional archives as institutions and sites of power. The effects of archival power are profound and can result in the systemic erasure of marginalized communities, which archives scholar Michelle Caswell describes as “symbolic annihilation.”

Beginning in the mid-20th century in the U.S. and Canada, concern over archival erasures and the symbolic annihilation of LGBTQ+ people catalyzed a wave of grassroots LGBTQ+ archival initiatives. Yet even after queer archival initiatives had demonstrated their sticking power—examples include the

ArQuives (Toronto, Canada; founded in 1973), the GLBT Historical Society (San Francisco, CA; founded in 1985), and the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (Los Angeles, CA; founded in 1952)—queer-themed archival initiatives have continued to proliferate into the 21st century. Over the past decade, dozens of LGBTQ+ archives have been newly created and queer and trans oral history projects and digital archives continue to multiply.

When K.J. Rawson initially created the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA), a freely available online repository for trans-related historical materials, he was determined to address significant access barriers for conducting research on people who had defied gender norms. Accounts of gender transgressors have long been buried deep in archives and special collections, when they are even collected at all. Even within grassroots LGBTQ+ archives, such accounts may not be collected as frequently, they may be less visible than lesbian and gay histories, or they may be interpreted as evidence of sexual identity rather than gender identity.

The DTA's collection scope hinges upon gender transgressive practices rather than transgender identity (i.e., they collect any documentations of trans-ing gender practices, not just accounts of transgender-identified people) in an attempt to collect widely without imposing anachronistic identity categories on historical subjects. As a collaboration among more than sixty partners who contribute materials to the site, the DTA can be understood as a horizontal institution in that their work cuts across many different types of cultural heritage institutions operating vertically, including colleges and universities, non-profit archives, historical societies, public libraries, and government collections. The DTA is an archival project designed to address archival gaps, a prime example of the cyclical process of archival institutionalization causing exclusion and requiring further institutions to address those exclusions.

Queer archival projects are particularly well-positioned to reveal the effects of this cycle given their deep commitments to anti-normativity, self-representation, and the personal and political impacts of controlling history. At its best, the DTA works, like many other queer archives, to destabilize its own authority as an archival institution by calling attention to the inherent and inevitable inequities in archival representation that it perpetuates. It is a model of simultaneously working both within and against systems.

As we consider cycles of archival institutionalization—particularly the creation of archives to address archival gaps, as we see happening perpetually in the queer cultural heritage landscape—we need to be more carefully attuned to

initiatives that are just emerging and those have not even started yet. One example to consider is the Black Lesbian Archives, a project created by Krü Maekdo in mid-2017 to address the lack of representation of Black lesbians in digital and physical collections. Despite more than 65 years of queer archiving in the U.S., such projects demonstrate that there are still marginalized communities within marginalized archives. One of the features of this project is a planned mobile herstory bus tour throughout the southwestern U.S., which illustrates how grassroots archival initiatives can expand typical notions of archiving to develop archival methods that are fitting for those communities seeking archival representation and historical documentation.

While the burden falls squarely on marginalized communities to usher in their own archival initiatives, within the academy, faculty have had to fight to make research on and with marginalized communities count, to make it valued in teaching and scholarship. It is not coincidental that the DTA emerged alongside the emergence of the field of Transgender Studies—as new topics of inquiry emerge in the Humanities, scholars trod well-worn paths to archives, revealing the symbiotic relationship between cultural heritage institutions and the research that they support. What should be a significant cause for concern is that while the Humanities may be increasingly attuned to marginalized communities and related social justice issues, the burden of archival efforts has remained on those who continue to be excluded from archival power.

While projects like JSTOR and Hathitrust demonstrate the collective power of trans-institutional collection building, and the Digital Transgender Archive shows how vision, with even a modicum of institutional support can create the research base for the humanities, institutional capacity to support change cannot always keep up with the society's ability to create the material of history and with the vision that capturing the ephemera of a historical moment requires.

Documenting the Now, “is a tool and a community developed around supporting the ethical collection, use, and preservation of social media content.” As Bergis Jules, Ed Summers, and Dr. Vernon Mitchell, Jr. write, the project began in the aftermath of the police killing of Michael Brown on August 9th, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. Social media, and Twitter in particular, where most of the information about Ferguson was shared, was a vital avenue for disseminating information about the case, the social activism it spurred, and the opposition to the protests that followed. The Twitter digital content from the Ferguson protests, for example, represented an authentic depiction of the significance of the events, the activity surrounding them, the diversity of the actors, and the nature

of the protests' support and opposition. The level of participation in these movements as they play out on social media makes them rich scholarly resources deserving of collection, preservation and study.⁵⁹

Between the Digital Transgender Archive and Documenting the Now, we have seen how “collections” are being constructed and how humanists and those who support them are determining how to care for these primary source collections. In a digital age, the locus of that activity can happen outside of the longstanding home of collection-building. How libraries adapt to support innovative scholarship going forward is on the top of every librarian's agenda in 2024.⁶⁰

The boundaries between the once distinct functions of library collection building, university publishing, and the relationship between the university and its community blur as walls become porous and longstanding social and institutional structure torque: In *Decolonizing the Digital Humanities in Theory and Practice*, Roopika Risam notes the need for local focus in digital humanities efforts that seek to decolonize the humanities; she describes how Professor Kim Christen of Washington State University had to build appropriate software tools to be able to work in a respectful way with the 17 native tribes who live in the region: “The Mukurtu Content Management System . . . began in response to needs of the Warumungu Aboriginal community in collaboration with Kim Christen and Craig Dietrich . . . allowing Indigenous communities to exercise cultural protocols for what should be shared and with whom.”⁶¹ Entrepreneurial scholars like Kim Christen and other digital humanists build collections, devise policies about ethical engagement with their subjects, and are changing the humanities.

Middlebury College Dean of the Library Mike Roy describes how the library supports these new directions: Humanities faculty are increasingly interested in learning the new methods and tools of data science, and to find ways to ask new questions of old texts. Thus we are seeing “data science across the curriculum” courses that are not dissimilar to the old statistics courses where

⁵⁹ Bergis Jules, Ed Summers, and Dr. Vernon Mitchell, Jr. *Documenting The Now, Ethical Considerations for Archiving Social Media Content Generated by Contemporary Social Movements: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations*, 3 April 2018.

⁶⁰ See the Report of the ACLS Commission on Fostering and Sustaining Diverse Digital Scholarship (forthcoming).

⁶¹ Roopika Risam, “Decolonizing the Digital Humanities in Theory and Practice,” *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, (2018): 78–86. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.13013/421>.

students learn data science concepts and methods divorced from any particular field, but then also work in sections across the curriculum (including the humanities) applying these methods to data specific to the domain area, with instruction provided by the relevant disciplinary faculty. We are seeing humanities departments hiring faculty whose research is explicitly in the realm of applying data science methods to the humanities. The rise of data science is also a phenomena in need of critical inquiry, and so we also see a rise in efforts within the humanistic social sciences and the humanities themselves that aim to remind us that no field of inquiry is neutral, and that the societal and cultural biases (e.g. racism, neoliberalism, etc.) are deeply if not inextricably bound into these ways of thinking about data and of thinking about the world as being made of data.

With the public sphere having moved online (and in many ways, privatized by Twitter and Facebook), much of this public humanities work, which aims to create resources and experiences beyond the walls of the academy, takes place online, taking the form of exhibits, catalogs, videos, and other “born digital” forms. This work is bleeding over into the curriculum, asking students to create non-traditional forms of scholarship, and to learn to write for a broader audience, and learning some technology skills as a useful by-product.

This shift from content to workflow on the part of scholars and libraries represents a responsiveness to both the market wants of students and the creative impulses of faculty who are experimenting and creating the fields of the future. The availability of thousands of librarians and instructional technologists across the landscape of US higher education stands as a network of support for innovative humanistic undertakings that would surely be less well-developed if the only support for digital innovation came from the humanists themselves. As the library evolves from being mausoleums for books, librarians are evolving to provide some of the much-needed support for methods that needed to evolve the humanities and support the innovative work that our pluralistic institutional diversity and experimentation generates.

Roy explicitly points to the danger of reliance upon well-capitalized market-driven infrastructure, asking how the humanities (and really all research activities) might shift away from the corporate infrastructure that has over the last three decades come to dominate the ways in which information is created, disseminated, used, and preserved, towards a community-owned and community-led infrastructure that shares the values and priorities of the scholarly community.

Until the age of digitization, it made good sense that the library function of assembling the latest journal literature published via the peer-reviewed processes sanctioned by scholarly societies or the latest books published by university presses needed to be physically obtained and housed in Charlottesville, Virginia or Lincoln, Nebraska and literally thousands of other campuses. The world increasingly flows into and through the university campus via the humanities. And also the library inclusive of the knowledge dissemination and access system is (like higher ed generally) a mix of the value of competitive local action and systemically beneficial collective action, where libraries and campuses produce and access shared resources.

Over a thousand four-year colleges and universities have significant humanities programs—and many of the other 3,000 colleges, universities and community colleges do as well. Each of these provides a locus for experimentation through the dynamic market of students taking classes but also through the resource-building and field-building efforts of KJ Rawson or Kim Christen. Supporting the work of these faculty, and devising enterprise solutions to the use of collections leads libraries to experiment, innovate, and compete for prestige as well. As the boundaries of the library—“the heart of the university”—fall away as communities become partners in content creation and as technology moves the books and journals from the shelves to the cloud, new collaborations are needed and represent new opportunities.

But the longstanding rules of the publication game persist long after pluralistic modes of scholarly activity are established alongside the still-valued processes of publication. So, as William Savage argues, the monolithic focus on publications spurs, “forced productivity,” with more journals requiring more volunteer editors, and more panels at scholarly conferences than attendees can ever attend. The system stretches and strains to require more and more free labor to keep the promotion-and-tenure accrediting process churning at full speed. And ever more tortuous measures of productivity on the part of analytics systems created by or licensed by university administrations. They track what is most easily tracked. When institutions seize upon citation and impact factors, they cast aside questions of the audience of the scholarship *how* the work reaches the limited audience that it does: “Though many in the scholarly community remain fixated on papers, books, and grants as the usual indicators of ‘success,’ there is growing consideration of how scholarly work reaches and impacts the

wider world.”⁶²

Infrastructure for Disseminating Humanities Scholarship

The early 20th model for filling and re-filling these constructed reservoirs for publications required an associated investment in the presses that curate, edit, print, and publicize emerging scholarship. University presses developed as part of the emerging model of the American research university in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as one part of this new national apparatus of scholarship.

The co-creation of knowledge with the native communities around Washington State university, among activists on Black Twitter, and contributors to the Digital Transgender Archive illustrate the creation and dissemination of resources has changed as technology has pierced or even evaporated the formal structures that separate humanities scholars from the world. The creation of libraries recognizes that scholarship builds on scholarship; how has the dissemination of scholarship evolved? How has the evolution of publishers and the newer entrants into the world of disseminating scholarship—platforms—shaped today’s humanities?

One recurring theme of this report is the productive tension between local action—such as the work of autonomous scholars on campuses making their case to students of the importance of their class or to the provost of the importance of their scholarship—and collective community action—such as the evolving norms of the Renaissance Society of America or the building of collections that can be used across the landscape of colleges and universities rather than just locally. What is the state of autonomous action and collective action in the world of publishing?

The evolution of the library away from a monolithic focus on collecting has happened because other entities have evolved (or been created) with the capacity to remotely house enormous collections which are then distributed digitally. The challenge of doing so comes in covering the significant ongoing costs of the shared infrastructure and services associated with this collective action. Publishers—particularly those with significant offerings of expensive science resources—have in recent years moved from one-way streets of providing subscription-based access to journals to the more expansive role of providing a

⁶² As the DORA project puts it in describing their Tools to Advance Research Assessment project (TARA).

“platform”—a locus for activity built on connecting users to content but also to each other. Using data about usage to form user groups or make suggestions about related content was the first step; reaching further into the workflow of “readers” makes these wide-reaching platforms more valuable—and more powerful. Some, were initiated within the scholarly community, like Hathitrust (created by the University of Michigan and the Big Ten Academic Alliance to make non-profit use of the scans created in the massive Google Books scanning project) or JSTOR (the non-profit originally created by the Mellon Foundation to relieve libraries struggling to keep up with the archiving of backlists of periodicals but quickly found to be essential for unlocking easy access to those archives). Other world-wide platforms, like Google or Amazon serve the scholarly community as an “oh by the way” part of their ambitious efforts to serve the entire world. The mixing of commercial motives and the services of scholarly support once provided locally by librarians alone has thrown both trust networks and user expectations up in the air. Books and journals continue to be central parts of the content needs of scholars—and in the section that follows, we review how mission driven imperatives (seeking the widest possible access with the lowest possible barriers to access) and sustainability or profit motives pull scholars in various and even internally conflicted directions. Here the US’s particular faith in the market fosters both thrilling innovations and the risk of loss of public goods.

The Book and Beyond the Book

So much of the story of humanities publishing in the US is pre-determined by the course of the scientific enterprise. As the 20th century passed, science journals became a big business with high subscription costs for colleges and universities; in their own modest ways, humanities journals followed this model. In the past 20 years, the rules of the science publishing game have again shaped the possible futures of humanities journal publishing as the subvention of open access in scientific literature has been built into the government funding of science and medicine. Though little such funding is provided in the humanities, the expectation and the possibilities of digital distribution of scholarship without barriers has been introduced. Addressing how to gain the very significant advantages of open access while maintaining a viable model has become a significant focus of both university presses and society journal publishers.

University presses supported the scholarly system used to advance the professional careers of humanities scholars but the system was probably destined to

strain as many hundreds of institutions emulated the book publication metric. As Charles Watkinson notes, today, presses are more likely to be seen as burdensome local cost-centers resting on the quirky business models supporting a systemic infrastructure “with [more than 4,000 degree-granting institutions](#) and fewer than 130 university presses in the United States and Canada.”⁶³

Books remain the peculiar domain of the humanities scholar. Despite financial duress on the part of university presses, over 4,000 humanities monographs are published by US university presses every year. The presses that once were subsidized as a necessary component in a chain of scholarship are now strained as institutional cost centers expected to balance their own budgets in ways that they never were before. Those pressures in turn shape the risks that they can take in helping to stake out new areas of scholarship or new approaches. And the reach of books has steadily retreated both as presses reduce their print runs, create exclusive online packages, and raise their prices. Many university press humanities books can now be counted on to be purchased by two hundred large libraries; this limited circulation sharply reduces the ability of increasing new knowledge. As Historian Peter Baldwin has noted, “The only readers who will see it are those who can afford the three-figure price of a Routledge or Oxford University Press book or who enjoy lending privileges at major research libraries. Monograph publication is effectively privatization. . . . From the reading public’s vantage, these books might as well have been buried in their authors’ back gardens.”⁶⁴

And while the open access puzzle for humanities journals seems entrapped in the dynamics of a commercial model created by the sciences, there are good reasons to believe that the ecosystem around books can evolve. The money that already circulates in the book purchasing ecosystem might be re-arranged with the outcome providing more optimal access, an idea that is being tested in various subscribe-to-open models in which subscription funds support the content eventually being converted to open access. These models benefit scholars both by gaining them access to material (regardless of whether they hold a post at an institution that’s able to purchase books) and by exposing their scholarship to the world.

Charles Watkinson reports on the lessons learned from book usage in the natural experiment provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic: “we discovered an

⁶³ Charles Watkinson and Melissa Pitts, “Re-Envisioning Humanities Infrastructure” in *Inside Higher Ed*, February 22, 2021.

⁶⁴ Baldwin, Peter. *Athena Unbound*, p. 200.

untapped global thirst for even the most esoteric subjects. In one of the most significant social experiments of the pandemic, eighty publishers participating in Project MUSE (based at Johns Hopkins University Press) made close to 25,000 books free to all users during much of 2020. eBook copies of monographs that had sold fewer than 200 copies, mainly through US wholesalers, suddenly showed spikes of use all over the globe: A teacher in Northern India passionate about Japanese poetry praised the speed with which the eBook downloaded onto his phone; a retired judge living in small-town America rediscovered his love of the classics born during long-ago college years; an environmental activist in Spain used expensive political science monographs to build advocacy resources for future campaigns. Many independent and precarious scholars described their feelings of relief and gratitude in not having to beg and borrow authentication through a library. Ground-down for years by the conflation of lack of physical circulation with a lack of interest, humanities publishers saw the passion unleashed when access to monographs became ubiquitous and easy.”

How can we best meet the unmet needs we observed outside the confines of institutional paywalls? From the institutional library side, Mike Roy agrees that the opportunities to acquire access to books without the chaotic scramble of purchasing different books from different presses with different rules would be healthy for the humanities: “Within libraries, historically considered to be the laboratory of the humanities, over the past few decades there has been a slow but steady decline in funding for and use of scholarly monographs. This has been driven both by the serials crisis (where libraries rob book budgets to pay for out-of-control inflation in serials costs) and the enrollment drops in the humanities. In spite of this dismal trend, the past five years has seen much growth in the open access monograph realm. . . . The platforms for these publications are often conceived of as digital first, providing features that allow for the inclusion of media, hyperlinking, data sets, and greater interactivity, and the fact that they are open access means that the reach of these publications is far greater, often changing (mostly for the better) how the author thinks of their audience.”

Watkinson sees a world where it is not only the passionate amateur scholars who can access the scholarship of humanists, but where differential manifestations of vetted material makes its ways to different audiences: The Michigan Humanities Collaboratory recently incubated three collaborative writing projects by interdisciplinary and intergenerational teams under the title “The Book

Unbound.” The teams worked from the start with colleagues from the Library and Press, and the process was documented in video. The constituent Developing Writers in Higher Education product shows how the multilayered “pyramidal book” envisaged by Harvard historian Robert Darnton in 1999 is now being realized. An “engagement layer” leads to a “reading layer” (also fossilized in book form) which itself links to a “data layer.” Paths between the layers allow a “skimmer” to discover the work, become motivated to immerse themselves as a “swimmer,” and then investigate the underlying data as a “diver.”

While humanities scholarship will continue to be pluralistic, with deep and specialized traditional scholarship at its core, humanists are also finding audiences that will matter through accessible channels like *The Conversation* or *Hyperallergic*. Watkinson reminds us that, “the clear writing that distinguishes the best academic authors (whether affiliated or unaffiliated with a higher education institution and whoever their audience is) has universal appeal.” The book can be written in the most extreme insider language of specialization (as, of course, can the article). But the book can also be the place where new fields are built. The book should not be the only way to measure the impact of a humanist. But as the coin of the realm, there needs to be a healthy book ecosystem for fields to be built. “Like other entrepreneurial work,” Duke University Press editor Ken Wissoker reminds us, “publishing depends on opportunities. One or two successful books in an area can send the press after more. A series editor or an active member of a faculty–advisory board can help a press build its list quickly in a specific field. Most importantly, editors are always on the lookout for fields with space for new players or where a new scholarly approach might benefit from a press dedicated to publishing it.”⁶⁵

How can librarians and publishers sustain an ecosystem of humanities publishing where access to the digital version of each title is free? A recent system-wide collaborative effort enlisted dozens of university presses and JSTOR to make a significant aggregation of new books available on a subscribe-to-open basis, in a pilot project called Path to Open. The intention of the pilot is to define and test a community-wide effort that will aggregate a significant number of frontlist humanities monographs from university presses, distribute them for three years during an embargo period on a restricted-access basis, and then

⁶⁵ Ken Wissoker, “Scholarly Monographs Are Flourishing, Not Dying,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 12, 1997. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/scholarly-monographs-are-flourishing-not-dying/>.

open them to the world at the end of the embargo period.⁶⁶

If the system that fosters new books is constrained, the capacity to support new areas of scholarship and particularly to support historically under-supported fields, will diminish. The challenges to the current economic model represent a serious threat to bibliodiversity. Without the enormous financial stakes of big science, the humanities system might—through experiments like TOME or Path to Open— find a path towards collective action and shared support of system-wide need. An inequitable book ecosystem, reliant on an increasingly small number of libraries or well-resourced scholars to purchase increasingly costly books will inevitably squeeze out emerging voices and emerging scholars. As Risam notes,

humanities-based knowledge production—whether in history, art, literature, or culture, more broadly—has historically been wielded as a technology of colonialism, as important as the technologies of the slave ship and the gun. Therefore, the question at the heart of decolonization and digital humanities is how we can use technologies to undo the technologies of colonialism. . . . The need for the creation of new methods, tools, projects, and platforms to undo the epistemic violence of colonialism and fully realize a decolonized digital humanities.⁶⁷

As Poet and Literature Professor DaMaris Hill notes, “Digital knowledge production provides unique opportunities for Black scholars and practitioners of digital environments to begin to curate and negotiate the futures that partners steeped in dominant cultural views have not, and often cannot, envision. I’m convinced that Black digital studies and considerations for 21st century studies about race and culture should be priorities. In addition, the academic ecosystem should acknowledge and embrace that digital knowledge production in Black Studies is a space where machine methodologies and analysis of digital environments provides insight about what it means to be human in this time and place. It also provides an opportunity to document and hypothesize how intersectional identity markers associated with race and gender are evident in

⁶⁶ Path to Open. Other North American university press efforts in this territory include the Direct to Open program from The MIT Press, Fund to Mission from University of Michigan Press, and the multi-institutional membership model that powers the Lever Press. The Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem (TOME) initiative was jointly led by the Association of American Universities, the Association of Research Libraries, and the Association of University Presses.

⁶⁷ Roopika Risam, *Decolonizing the Digital Humanities in Theory and Practice*.

the immediate moments of the 21st century and hypothesize and imagine how these intersectional identity markers will present in the future.” This is most evident in Black Studies disciplines such as Afrofuturism, Environmental Studies, and Carceral/Abolition Studies.

In building new fields and new modes, Mike Roy reminds us of the tensions inherent in the US higher education which rarely thinks or acts collectively, leaving the door open to well-capitalized ventures; he urges us to aspire “to create an actual public sphere that does not monetize attention, answer to corporate bottom lines, and provides a set of interconnected platforms and protocols that are paid for by the money saved by cutting ties with the corporate overlords currently charging monopoly rents.” One need look no further than the sudden and dramatic changes to Twitter when the company was purchased and changed radically in the fall of 2022. While Twitter has been a boon to community and career building of scholars who have used the platform for community-based projects like *Documenting the Now* or scholarly communities like Black Twitter, depending on commercial platforms deprives the academic community of the promises made by mission-driven organizations.

And those non-profit and mission-driven organizations also have evolution yet to do. DaMaris Hill reminds us that what has been collected and cared for—and hence what has been the evidence of study—were not accidental but were conscious choices of how to preserve and represent the country’s structure: “The architecture of the academic ecosystem,” she observes, “is a honeycomb of new ideas and a cesspool of skepticism masquerading as tradition. The sweet brilliance of formalized curiosity and the stagnation of tradition is evident in the challenges associated with digital knowledge creation and digital publication dissemination. The academic ecosystem and partners are not divorced from inequity, nostalgia regarding empires, and the ideas of white supremacy that shaped academic knowledge since the onset of Modernity.” University of Maryland Professor Marisa Parham, chair of the Commission on Fostering and Sustaining Diverse Digital Scholarship asks, “how and where does this [digital] work flourish? Who or what falls out of our various equations? How will we make our projects last? How do we continue to cultivate or preserve our objects? And what is especially at stake in this for work seeded in historically marginalized or emergent communities?” As books continue to serve the field, other modes of knowledge dissemination are emerging and gaining some recognition, even before the scholars who produce them are recognized for their pioneering efforts. University presses have the capacity to mix the

mediation of legitimizing communities with the amplifying power of marketing. See, for example the peer-reviewed scholarly podcast titled [Secret Feminist Agenda](#), where WLU Press, in collaboration with Hannah McGregor, scholar and podcaster at Simon Fraser University/Canadian Institute for Studies in Publishing, is working to devise a new editorial methodology for the evaluation, editorial and production revision, peer review, and design and dissemination of podcasts as a unique form of scholarly communication. “Every week,” she explains, “I’m going to talk to a feminist about their nefarious and insurgent plans for overthrowing the patriarchy. So tell me: what’s your secret feminist agenda?” The peculiar market-driven ethos of US higher education has generated innovation in the digital realm of the humanities, just as it has in other facets of these fields. But sustaining and supporting those innovations in the collection-building enterprise which is the bedrock of the field-building enterprise represents our challenge for the coming decades.

Infrastructure around Philanthropy: Entrepreneurs, Experiments, and Systems Thinking

The longstanding structures of the humanities that built the teaching of the humanities to undergraduates into the steady work of colleges and universities in the early 20th century have provided a baseline of support for the humanities. In the unusual structure by which undergraduate students and families pay fees that support the wide range of departments, faculty in the humanities benefit from space to explore topics in their teaching and their research. Undergraduate humanities classes which are offered to both potential specialists (majors) and generalists (students who study business, engineering or virtually any other subject) provide faculty with market feedback and expose them to evolving interests of students. Some faculty members may, of course, see the messages and desiderata that they receive from students’ interests as an imposition upon the traditional areas of study or the methods that the faculty members see as their main (and most rewarded) focus. But for many others, the world comes in via their students. We recall John Dewey’s recognition of the involvement of humanists with “matters of social concern.” Classes that invite students to consider the narratives of their lives, the meaning of their cultures and identities, and the messages to be found in objects and images bring faculty into experimentation with the issues of the day.

And experiment they do. At Humanities Centers, they gather with colleagues in other fields; on committees, they encounter colleagues from across

the divisions; with graduate students and postdocs cross-pollinating methods from other institutions, they learn new methods. At conferences, they see how others are experimenting with new technologies or new sources. Institutions have an interest in fostering the experiments that emerge when they seem like they might provide the institution with a way of distinguishing itself from among its many otherwise similar peers. Idea generation among faculty (and staff) is not only supported—it's fully subsidized by the thousands of competitive idea incubators known as colleges and universities.

The risks to the innovative faculty member increase as the moment of tenure review approaches, though most such adventurers are warned from early on that if they fail to adhere to the longstanding demonstrations of scholarly success, they will not rise. It is here that external validation—in the form of external funding or relatable peer accolades make the difference between an innovator out alone on a precipice and one whose bold new directions will be celebrated by the institution on the cover of the alumni magazine.

While membership organizations reach across the networks of scholars who populate the scattered autonomous institutions, philanthropies do so from the outside. And just as individual colleges are left alone to define their own place in the market, foundations occupy an unusual and mostly unconstrained place in the “third sector” that exists between the government and private sectors. Paying attention to funders' interests represents one area that administrators and faculty agree upon. Gaining grants makes sense to the prestige seeking administrator and to the autonomy-seeking faculty. Without a doubt, signals sent by the few foundations who are dedicated to higher education or the humanities are followed closely and inevitably shape directions among scholars and institutions.

Post World War II, the Rockefeller Foundation's humanities division invested in internationally focused historical and linguistic study, translations, the development of foreign research centers, and American Studies programs. These initiatives were designed to encourage cross-cultural knowledge and new interdisciplinary programs but their unifying objective during the Cold War was to strengthen scholars and policymakers' understanding of parts of the world whose global importance affected American foreign policy.⁶⁸ In the

⁶⁸ See Rockefeller Archive Center, Area Studies, <https://resource.rockarch.org/topic/social-sciences/area-studies/>; Tim B. Mueller, “The Rockefeller Foundation, the Social Sciences, and the Humanities in the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 15:3 (Summer 2013), 114; and Kathleen McCarthy, “The Short and Simple Annals of the Poor: Foundation Funding for the

1960s, the Ford Foundation invested hundreds of millions of dollars to raise faculty salaries at private colleges, universities, and HBCUs, spur colleges and universities to develop fundraising programs, and support non-Western area studies by including salary provisions for faculty and library staff, expansion of library holdings, and graduate student fellowships.⁶⁹ Along with the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations, Ford responded to higher education's extraordinary postwar enrollment growth by investing in new faculty, supporting the fields of history, language, literature, and philosophy, providing seed money for interdisciplinary programs, and expanding educational opportunity through predoctoral, dissertation, and postdoctoral fellowships for students of color.⁷⁰ These fellowship programs, which provided time to turn dissertations into publications, launch new projects, build teaching credentials, and take advantage of mentoring and professional development opportunities, represented the first sustained effort to diversify the professoriate.

Just as postwar funding for higher education's expanding national mission began to ebb in the late 1950s, the launch of the first Sputnik satellite (1957) shocked the American public, raising serious questions about a "missile gap" with the Soviet Union, and the United States' apparent lack of scientific and technological competitiveness. The subsequent passage of the National Defense Education Act (1958) marked the beginning of massive direct federal spending for higher education, especially in science and engineering technology and the study of select foreign languages. At a time when unsettling domestic social challenges and global threats had contributed to a crisis of faith about American values and purpose, academic humanists and advocates of the humanities sought to strengthen the relationship between the humanities and the state.⁷¹ The 1964 report of an ACLS-led Commission on the Humanities linked the national apprehension about the Cold War and the social and political turbulence

Humanities, 1900-1983," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 129:1 (March 1985), 5-6.

⁶⁹ Bok, *The Struggle to Reform our Colleges*, pp. 99-100, Thelin, p. 284, and George M. Beckmann, "The Role of the Foundations: The Non-Western World in Higher Education," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 356 (November 1964), 12-22.

⁷⁰ Fred E. Crossland, "Foundations and Higher Education: The Crisis in Higher Education," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, 35:2 (1983), 51-55. Ford Foundation grants supported the growth of interdisciplinary fields including American studies, African American studies, ethnic studies, religious studies, ethnomusicology, and linguistics.

⁷¹ Christopher P. Loss, *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of Higher Education in the 20th Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 156-160 and Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, pp. 165-167.

regarding racial injustice and the demand for civil rights to the scandalous underfunding of the humanities.

The legislation creating the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in 1965 allocated significant funding to higher education for fellowships, research, archival training, library development, interdisciplinary studies, curricular reform, and outreach (through state and territorial humanities councils).⁷² Whether in support of field building (as in the efforts of the Rockefeller Foundation's support of Latin American Studies) or support of more traditional faculty undertakings, the signaling power of foundation dollars goes far beyond the actual funds. In the next section, Whiting Foundation Executive Director, Daniel Reid, describes a recent strategy to legitimize a particular direction in the academic humanities.

The Whiting Foundation Public Engagement Programs

Daniel Reid, now associate director of the Getty Foundation but previously the Executive Director of the Whiting Foundation led a project to strengthen the rewarding of humanities professors whose scholarly work engages with the public outside of the academy. Like the MLA's work to provide guidance and norms for evaluating digital scholarship, the Whiting Foundation sought to influence the incentive structures that shape the behavior of teachers and scholars, responding to an extensive survey of needs in the field that identified a widespread desire among academics to connect more closely with broader publics. Without the significant funding power of the NEH and without the bottom-up buy-in from the community that MLA channeled, Whiting's method leaned on working within the established vocabulary of rewards. "The central goal of the Public Engagement Programs was to provide funding to empower individual scholars engaged in collaborative public-facing projects. But we were conscious of the structural issues in the academy that made it difficult for faculty to undertake this work in a sustained way. Since we don't have a lot of money," Reid notes, "we hoped that making these grants in the form of fellowships—even of modest amounts of money—might have disproportionate impact for professional committees evaluating candidates. An award like this, beginning with nomination by a dean or provost and then bestowed through peer review in a national competition, is legible within existing systems of value in the academy, even if it doesn't take the most traditional form. It has proved especially

⁷² McCarthy, 6.

meaningful at public and teaching institutions, where the idea of serving a community beyond the walls is readier to hand and where, in some cases, faculty less commonly receive national fellowships than at traditionally elite private schools, so it stands out. That's where we think the reward structure is most susceptible to the kind of modest nudge we can give it to support the behavior—the approach to scholarship—that so many within the profession, so many students, and so much of the public actually want to see, but which often doesn't 'count' or 'fit' within inherited reward structures." In subsequent phases, Whiting has also sought nominations via scholarly societies, thereby amplifying the signal by sending it through horizontal as well as vertical institutions. Within the academy, promotion and tenure rules of the game are among the most change-resistant structures, so these strategies to evolve them will require patience and time.

On campuses across the United States, faculty and administrators who recognize the importance of the public humanities for American society and for the future of the humanities themselves have been advocating for greater support for and recognition of publicly engaged work as part of the scholarly vocation. In making their case, they can point to an impressive efflorescence of public-facing projects involving humanities faculty that have had transformative effects on communities, reflected in the growing Humanities for All database (created and maintained by the National Humanities Alliance). Thanks to this advocacy across the sector, momentum has been building, and the horizontal institutions of higher education have been changing. Reid notes that the tentative trajectory does seem to be toward greater recognition for publicly engaged scholarship, as suggested by one grantee's comment in a 2020 evaluation of the program: "My Dean is strongly encouraging me to go up for full professor based in large part on [my public humanities project], combined with a collaborative book I am publishing this year. It is significant that the book is not a monograph. This would have been unheard of in past years." The Whiting Public Engagement Programs, unlike initiatives by some of the other, larger funders discussed in this section, do not directly fund institutional change but rather individual faculty and their public-facing projects. But, because faculty must be nominated by their university or scholarly society to apply, those institutions are meaningfully involved in identifying and then supporting nominees. As we have noted elsewhere in this report, the only changes that are meaningful in the humanities starts with change within the microenvironment of individual institution; if blessed or supported there, the unintentional

network of institution competition and comparison can carry the message across the networks that unconsciously entangle individual institutions in isomorphism.

Whiting grantees cited changes to their teaching and mentorship of students. As one put it, “This fellowship allowed me to flourish as a mentor to undergraduate and graduate students, introducing them to new realms of historical and humanistic research that went far beyond the kinds of experiences they had had in the classroom. It helped to create a small cohort of very dedicated scholars–thinkers–doers. The feedback that I have received from them over the past couple of years has been a huge motivator for me. It has been absolutely amazing to see the doors open for them in terms of internships, jobs, freelance work, etc.—all stemming directly from their engagement with me and [the public–humanities project].”

Given US higher education’s dependence upon student success and satisfaction, the Whiting effort suggests how strategic foundation funding can provoke systems change.

Filling Gaps in the Collective Weave: Philanthropy beyond Signaling

In the first half of the 20th century, the Carnegie Corporation employed a range of philanthropic strategies to build up the collective infrastructure of academic libraries: In the pre–World War I period, “professional and popular interest was centered on the erection of library buildings and on the initial acquisition of book reservoirs.” After these grants aimed at addressing the most visible need, the Corporation created an advisory committee to identify other, perhaps less obvious gaps in the infrastructure of the new academic library. In 1939, Robert Lester described these efforts: “After the war, a series of studies revealed the need, among others, for more well–trained professional librarians of general competence, for an effective central organization, and for better library schools. In an effort to meet these needs, the corporation made large general grants in 1926, covering a ten–year period, to stabilize the American Library Association and to establish library schools of high academic standing. As a result of all this there is already in evidence a new type of library service, and also a new type of college librarian.”⁷³

⁷³ Robert M. Lester, “Carnegie Corporation Aid to College Libraries,” *College and Research Libraries*. (1939): 72–83.

While individual colleges and universities had taken on the stewardship and operations of their local campus libraries, Carnegie turned to the invisible networks of training and certification (via the ALA) that would promulgate standards and norms throughout the professional training and networks which would serve a scalable number of librarians. In the unusual system of pluralistic US higher education, infrastructure gaps are sometimes filled by private philanthropy. While the professionalization of library schools clearly would emmesh the librarians of the future in shared norms of better service—a standard setting exercise that the “market” of fragmented colleges and universities not only would *not* be inclined to invest in, but most likely wouldn’t even envision from their own immediate perspectives, Lester noted that Carnegie’s perspective would also foresee (and invest in) the technological innovations that were also dismissed as impractical. He notes (in 1939!) the Corporation’s interest in “microphotography and the mechanical or scientific aids to learning, which though still disregarded by many librarians, these processes will probably revolutionize many aspects of library work and service within the next twenty years.” Microfilm did, of course, revolutionize the sharing and study of everything from holdings from other remote international archives to the compiling of the world’s newspapers—a task that would have been impossible for local libraries to maintain on their own.⁷⁴ Microfilm would also form the basis of the business models for revolutionary library services companies. University Microfilms, a company that started by creating surrogates of dissertations began in 1939, growing (in various leaps) into ProQuest, one of the largest vendors supporting libraries around the world today. Carnegie’s early interest in this new technology most likely filled a gap that the immediate needs of diverse academic libraries would see.

Created in 1969 through the combination of two family-led philanthropies, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (now The Mellon Foundation) has demonstrated a willingness to place some big bets to address collective system needs. Most recently, as part of its mission to build just and equitable communities, Mellon refocused its higher education grantmaking to invest in humanities scholarship, teaching and public outreach that support racial justice, social equality, and full participation for marginalized students, including those impacted by the justice system.

⁷⁴ Meghan Bogardus Cortex, “Microfiche Was the Dawn of Multimedia Research,” in *EdTech Magazine*. May 18, 2017. <https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2017/05/microfiche-was-dawn-multimedia-research>.

Beyond the billions of dollars of investments in individual projects, seminars, or college and university programs, the impact of Mellon in fostering the creation of infrastructure in the humanities is immediately obvious:

- Playing the central role in supporting intermediary organizations that have connected programs and practitioners, including the Research Library Group (RLG), the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), The Association of Art Museum Curators (AAMC), the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), the Digital Library Federation (DLF), the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS).
- Fostering collective start up efforts that have become significant inter-institutional tools for humanistic scholarship in teaching: JSTOR (started with UMich Grants), Shared Canvas (which has become the International Image Interoperability Framework), the Academic Image Cooperative and the Mellon International Dunhuang Archives, both of which were formative experiments that led to Artstor. As of March 26, 2019, Mellon had made 1,710 grants to institutions and organizations involved in the various aspect of libraries, publishing, and scholarly communications totaling \$800,015,240.
- Human capital of the humanities: The Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program, created in 1989, has the objective to “address, over time, the problem of underrepresentation in the academy at the level of college and university faculties—specifically, faculties in the humanities and selected social sciences. This goal can be achieved both by increasing the number of students from underrepresented minority groups (URM) who pursue PhDs and by supporting the pursuit of PhDs by students who may not come from traditional minority groups but have otherwise demonstrated a commitment to the goals of MMUF.”⁷⁵ This sort of work aims not at the goals of one particular institution but of the sector: 1,200 MMUF fellows have attained the PhD.

In these ways, Mellon has been so central to work in the humanities for more than 50 years. And while its funding for *HumetricsHSS* has been a relatively modest investment, it’s worth considering it as a case study for how those who practice the trans-institutional art of philanthropy have a particular

⁷⁵ <https://www.mmuf.org/>.

perspective to notice gaps in collective infrastructure and the even more rare capacity to play a role in doing something to address those gaps.

Since so much of the enterprise has (as we have seen) depended upon the processes of reviewing and rewarding faculty members' scholarship, universities have in recent years, with the best of intentions, sought to bring analytic rigor to this process. The creation of digital networks through which scholarship can be disseminated and its usage can be tabulated have created new and detailed opportunities for seeing where and how the published work of scholars is called upon. This capacity is full of possibilities; it is also full—in these early days of establishing practices for fields as different as the biological sciences and the humanities—of challenges, as Rutgers (and other universities employing these methods in the humanities) have learned.

In 2016, a controversy erupted at Rutgers University over the use of Academic Analytics, an outside firm that provides data analytics concerning faculty research productivity and allows institutions to compare their own departments' results to those of their peers: "Taken on their own terms, the measures of books, articles, awards, grants and citations within the Academic Analytics database frequently undercount, overcount or otherwise misrepresent the achievements of individual scholars," and those measures "have the potential to influence, redirect and narrow scholarship as administrators incite faculty and departments to compete for higher scores."⁷⁶ These systems are largely built on the measures designed around the sciences: the value of articles older than five years are discounted, chapters in edited volumes are not tracked at all. Reliant on citation indices which, of course, can expand via the wider accessibility of open access subsidized science articles, these systems are of limited use for the humanities. Research Information Management (RIM) systems are now ubiquitous in the United Kingdom and Australia but [are spreading rapidly throughout North American universities](#). These systems harvest information about publications, grants, and other "faculty outputs" and connect it with institutional HR systems to power profile pages, activity reporting, and databases of collaboration opportunities. Humanities scholarship is a poor fit for these systems built around STEM outputs. Books appear much less reliably than journal articles.⁷⁷ Digital projects in the humanities have even less chance of showing up in an administrative analytics dashboard. Beyond such omissions, the very

⁷⁶ Colleen Flaherty, "Refusing to be Measured," *Inside Higher Ed*, 2016.

⁷⁷ Bryant et al. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2021/12/06/guest-post-scholarly-book-publishing-workflows-and-implications-for-rim-systems/>.

logic underpinning what deserves to be measured is shaped by disciplines like medicine that have very different values and priorities to the humanities.

What gets lost when the analytics tracking the work of humanities scholars rely on longstanding metrics? DaMaris Hill notes the subtle inequities that will inevitably be built into unconscious practices based on four centuries of exclusive institutional opportunity structures: “It is equally important to consider how digital knowledge production in Black Studies impacts merit, publication, and award systems associated with tenure and promotion by interrogating what embedded behaviors associated with agency theory in the academic ecosystem are inhibiting or aiding how we value digital knowledge production and/within Black Studies. There are very few highly valued academic journals or manuscript publication outlets that focus on Black Studies in the academic ecosystem. Whenever a Black literature scholar is reviewed for tenure, she is often asked if she published in any “top tier quality” journals like *The African American Review* (AAR). Because many of her colleagues are unfamiliar with academic journals that publish Black/African American literature, AAR is the only journal that is considered “top tier quality” by most tenure committees at predominately white institutions/universities. Considering the publication opportunities, 4,000 Black Studies literary scholars may be competing for a coveted 16 opportunities to publish essays about literary criticism a year. This disparity and lack of opportunity to publish in “top tier quality” journals that are highly valued in predominately white academic spaces is exacerbated by print mediums and embedded agency and bias toward “scholarly tradition.” The problem about professional merit for Black Studies scholars invested in digital knowledge production is inhibited by limited tenure-eligible professional prospects and publication opportunities. If the reward system for intersections of literary and cultural criticism, particularly Black literary and cultural criticism is low in “top tier quality” academic journals/ humanities publications, the careers of Black Studies faculty and practitioners remain vulnerable.

In the same way that the Carnegie Corporation sought, in the 1930s, to establish the standards that would train librarians to support the system, other Foundations seek to fill the systemic gaps—necessary public goods—that the market might need but have no mechanism to create and support. The goal of foundation funding can be to act as start-up capital for a needed service which then can support itself from the community that will benefit. This was the case with ORCID where a broad community of publishers and libraries benefit from

the existence of a registry of unique identifiers for researchers' names.⁷⁸ Formed as a result of a Mellon-hosted Scholarly Communications Institute in 2016, HumetricsHSS has set out to rethink and revise the analytics infrastructure surrounding the humanities. Funded by a series of Mellon Foundation grants beginning in 2016 that set out "to identify values broad enough to encompass a variety of scholarly practices that we might develop into a framework that could be used to improve the impact of scholarship by reimagining the rubrics we use to assess it." Systems change is hard work, and a deeply entrenched reward system largely defined by publication metrics created in support of biological and natural science research will not adapt overnight. The actions, innovations, and investments of creative and curious faculty and staff supporting the humanities at thousands of US institutions do most of the work—and HumetricsHSS and the support of enabling infrastructure by Mellon reminds us of the importance of some connective fiber, supported by those with a trans-institutional, system-wide perspective.

Risk is always part of venturing out from familiar coastlines, but the stakes of the risk set by reward structures of the pluralistic and highly autonomous network of US colleges and universities might continue to evolve as departments and disciplines do—and as those innovations are shared consciously or unconsciously across the horizontal networks. Without a doubt, foundations that are un-restrained by government policies or local institutional priorities can play a powerful role both in "blessing" new directions in scholarship and in helping to bolster the inter-institutional infrastructure for the sector that otherwise might be supported by no one, even if its presence benefits everyone.

What Do the Humanities Owe the Country?

Scholars and critics across the political spectrum have opined for decades about the causation, duration and perception of the forces that influence higher education and are often seen as marginalizing the study of the humanities. The declines in enrollments in humanities classes of today and the notable declines

⁷⁸ Some efforts that gain philanthropic support are started by commercial firms who have a long-term interest in the sector and can sometimes act collectively. ORCID, which stands for Open Researcher and Contributor ID, is a global, not-for-profit organization sustained by fees from our member organizations. See <https://info.orcid.org/what-is-orcid/> ewas initiated by Thomson Reuters and Nature Publishing Group; Wellcome Trust was the only foundation listed in its group of foundation libraries and publishers, https://web.archive.org/web/20100202055935/http://orcid.securesites.net/media/pdf/ORCID_Announcement.pdf.

in the share of liberal arts majors as higher education expanded significantly in the last quarter of the past century capture some inescapable facts about a changing place of higher education.⁷⁹ Inside academic institutions the humanities' legitimacy is narrowly calculated by a scorecard of diminishing course enrollments, declining market share of majors and degrees, the size of incoming graduate student cohorts, allocation of tenure-track lines, and the tight academic job markets that await new PhDs.⁸⁰

Humanities faculty remain passionately committed to their scholarly fields, to expanding and rethinking what in the past might have been thought of as inviolable canons, developing new modes of interdisciplinary inquiry, supporting their students' personal development and, in recent years, attending to the complex problems of the communities and regions in which their institutions are located and have a shared civic responsibility. This resilience and responsiveness to challenges within and beyond the academy reflect a widely held belief among supporters of liberal learning that the humanities offer substantive methods and theories to address the growing cultural, social, and political fragmentation that divides the nation. In certain corners of the sector, specialization within scholarship is intensifying—a trend that also shapes the training of graduate students, many of whom are admitted to graduate programs and educated on the basis of their pursuing these particular modes of specialized research. But this is not the only current in the river of academic humanities. Across the country humanities faculty and students are deeply engaged with community partners in addressing contemporary “wicked problems” such as economic and

⁷⁹ For a representative sample of this genre see J.H. Plumb, *Crisis in the Humanities* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Michael Berube and Cary Nelson, eds., *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010); William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014); Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London: Verso, 2017), and Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities are in Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisis-of-confidence/567565/>.

⁸⁰ See Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weisbuch, *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021) and Cathy N. Davidson, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

social inequality, racial injustice, urban and rural poverty, global warming, mass incarceration, food precarity, and opioid addiction.

In *What Universities Owe Democracy*, Ronald Daniels argues that it is not enough for colleges and universities to create new knowledge, cultivate the exchange and respect for ideas, and foster social mobility. Higher education must also provide the “critical reasoning and bridging skills that enable citizens both to discern true from false and also translate ideas into collective action.”⁸¹ Throughout US history, higher education has struggled to determine how best to prepare students to be democratic citizens. The nineteenth-century college placed its emphasis on developing students’ moral character; the early twentieth-century university focused on teaching scientific reasoning and its mid-to-late century successor sought to inculcate a common cultural heritage through a program of general education that drew heavily on the humanities. The academy’s recent encouragement of and investment in an approach to scholarship that embraces the world, which enables students and faculty to address urgent societal challenges through coursework, research, and democracy-focused activities, represents the most recent effort to advance the public good and promote democratic flourishing.

Building a Sustainable Democracy Infrastructure

One need not participate in debates about the current condition of the academic humanities to appreciate that the “crisis” discourse serves as a proxy for wider concerns about the capacity of democratic institutions and liberal democracies to weather political storms.⁸² In many countries, universities, social media, news organizations, and the agencies of civil society are being delegitimized and manipulated by state-supported and privately controlled interests. Virulent forms of authoritarianism, ethnic nationalism, antisemitism, and white supremacy are on the rise and a politics of resentment, illiberalism, and anti-intellectualism have become part of the political mainstream. “It would be a scandal,” as Ronald Daniels notes, for US colleges and universities “to sit passively by as the political structures aligned with their [public] mission degrade around them. They cannot be complacent.”⁸³ This is an area where the humanities’ historical and critical self-reflection are well-suited to disentangle colleges and universities from

⁸¹ Daniels, p. 93.

⁸² Stefan Collini, “Seeing a Specialist: The Humanities as Academic Disciplines,” *Past & Present*, 229 (November 2015), 271.

⁸³ Daniels, p. 9.

inward-looking organizational sagas and encourage their *institutional* pursuit of reforms that protect democracy and the institutions of civil society.

As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun demonstrates, the humanities don't teach students about being informed citizens; they teach them to be informed citizens:

The rise of social media and the coming “dawn” of the era of Artificial Intelligence have renewed interest in the humanities. In October 2023, the National Endowment for the Humanities launched a “new agency-wide research initiative, [Humanities Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence](#), to support research projects that seek to understand and address the ethical, legal, and societal implications of AI. NEH is particularly interested in projects that explore the impacts of AI-related technologies on truth, trust, and democracy; safety and security; and privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties.” Schmidt Sciences (a private philanthropy) launched a [Humanities and AI Virtual Institute](#) (HAVI) is to advance the scholarship being undertaken in the humanities through the use of AI-based technology for research.” Finally, in a partnership with Google, the National Humanities Center has been leading [a collective curriculum building effort](#), “to support selected university faculty from across the country as they have developed and implemented courses on responsible AI that draw on humanities perspectives and methodologies.” There is growing acknowledgement that the line between technology and culture—if such a line once did exist—no longer does, and that the humanities—understood as the critical and creative study of human culture and society—matter and take place in spaces outside “the humanities.” To address the issue of “fake news,” the Beyond Verification project starts from the fact that fact-checking, though important, is not enough. Fact-checking sites lag behind the deluge of rumors produced by disinformation sources and spread via private interactions. Corrections and misinformation can reach very different audiences, and corrections can inadvertently keep debunked stories alive; even users who care about accuracy spread stories they find compelling, regardless of their facticity. Due to this seeming resistance to corrections and the spread of “fake news,” this era has been called one of “post truth,” that is, one in which emotions matter more than facts. Intriguingly though, the 2016 US presidential election was described as both normalizing “fake news” and as the “authenticity election.” Rather than giving up and declaring this a “post truth” era, Beyond Verification moves the focus from “this correct or incorrect” to “Why and how—under what circumstances (social, cultural, technical, and political)—do people find information to be true or authentic?”

The humanities—in particular literary studies, media studies, and theater and performance studies—are key to understand the power and practices of authenticity, and their current intersections with algorithmically-shaped social media.⁸⁴ The relationship between truth, facts, authenticity, and media is and has been complicated. The move to call society “post-truth” because of “fake news” erases important differences between truth, factuality, and authenticity, emphasized by historians and historians of science. It also ignores extensive research into the relationship between media and evidence; authenticity and politics. Media studies and political theory have highlighted the centrality of authenticity and rhetoric to trust and politics. Literary and African American studies have emphasized the importance of fiction, or critical fabulation, to truth-telling. Indigenous studies and anthropology have revealed the costs and benefits of the politics of authenticity. All of this work draws on similarities between algorithmic and political and cultural structures, for authenticity—as a response to the command “be true to yourself”—is algorithmic. Thus, the current proliferation of how-to-guides on authenticity and the gamification of authenticity—through the quantification and provocation of seemingly spontaneous and provocative interactions—are no surprise.

The relevance of the humanities and the voice of the critical humanities can be played upon by politicians looking for ways to play on fears, to demonize the other, to be anti-intellectual in the name of being American pragmatists. But the arguments over culture, history, and identity may also reveal the impulses of stronger forces—those that do not encourage a critical thinking populace. “Critical thinking depends,” writes Joan Scott, “on informed and disciplined knowledge, on our ability to search for—and to teach our students how to search for—truth. That kind of teaching is not a democratic process; it cannot be one. And yet democracy depends upon it.” The 1619 and 1776 exchange highlights this. Nikole Hannah Jones, journalist and primary creator of the 1619 project had been offered tenure by the University of North Carolina, only to have the offer denied at the level of the University’s regents. She wrote:

At some point when you have proven yourself and fought your way into institutions that were not built for you, when you’ve proven you can compete and excel at the highest level, you have to decide that you are done forcing yourself in. I fought this battle because I know that all across this country Black faculty, and faculty from other marginalized groups, are having their

⁸⁴ See Anthony Burton et al, *Algorithmic Authenticity* (Lueneburg: Meson Press, 2023).

opportunities stifled, and that if political appointees could successfully stop my tenure, then they would only be emboldened to do it to others who do not have my platform. I had to stand up.⁸⁵

The Trump-era attempt to rally the public against the ideas of the 1619 Project provides a space for a battle for the minds of a society's people. These debates occur freely and powerfully in the US academy because the dense weave of vertical and horizontal communities retains some vestigial faith in the liberal arts, in the humanities, and in the need for there to be the freedom to make arguments that some may not want to hear. Some will argue that the humanities are elite and have no right to shape the lives of people, including Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, educated at Yale College and Harvard Law School, who has centered his political campaigns on the motto that "Florida is where woke goes to die":

Nobody wants this crap, OK? This is an elite-driven phenomenon being driven by bureaucratic elites, elites in universities and elites in corporate America and they're trying to shove it down the throats of the American people. You're not doing that in the state of Florida," DeSantis said at an event in Wildwood, Florida, in December 2021.⁸⁶

At one of the trials in which DeSantis's policies were examined in court, his legal counsel was asked what defined "woke." "Asked what "woke" means more generally, [Desantis' General Counsel Ryan] Newman said "it would be the belief there are systemic injustices in American society and the need to address them."⁸⁷ Defending this position would be an activity that many US academics would be willing to do. The structures around the humanities are evolving and changing and have deep relevance to the people and issues of the United States. That's why fields like history or deciding what books students should have access to have emerged as a central arena for state and even national politics. New state laws certainly represent a particular challenge to a humanistic educational enterprise that is central for a critical and multivocal democracy.

⁸⁵ <https://www.naacpldf.org/press-release/nikole-hannah-jones-issues-statement-on-decision-to-decline-tenure-offer-at-university-of-north-carolina-chapel-hill-and-to-accept-knight-chair-appointment-at-howard-university/>.

⁸⁶ Kiara Alfonseca, "Florida doubles down on anti-critical race theory legislation, ABC News, January 19, 2022.

⁸⁷ Abigail Weinberg, "DeSantis Officials Finally Tell Us What "Woke" Means" on *Mojo Wire*, *Mother Jones*: December 5, 2022: <https://www.motherjones.com/mojo-wire/2022/12/desantis-ron-woke-florida-officials/>.

Private institutions may stand (as Joan Scott has argued) as the ultimate defender of academic freedom, but they too are exposed—not only to donors⁸⁸ “It’s very difficult to teach effectively or creatively in a situation where you are being second-guessed and undermined and not protected.” Private institutions also have to be sensitive to the market pressures from students and family who may or may not see humanities as worth their significant investment in fees. The market test can save the humanities by pressuring them to continue to evolve in ways that serve the society; the risk remains, of course, that too much dependence on the market results in costing students so much and burdening them with so much debt that the liberal arts will face increasing risk. The balances that we have reviewed in this essay are unusual and create a fertile place for the humanities—between the local institutional autonomy and opportunities for collective action that benefit the shared system, between a generalist impulse in the humanities that undergraduates and society can relate to and a specialized scholarship that provokes new directions and new fields of study, between change within existing structures and the recognition that the academy can thrive in recognizing its place within, and not only apart from, the world.

Creating within the spaces defined by these dynamics, the humanities matter here. The stakes of the political debates around identity, history, myths, and narratives clearly matter to the country at large. Is that because we care so much about particular books or particular interpretations or historical events? On many levels, yes. On other levels, other interests might be found behind the screen of the debates around directions in the humanities. In her landmark 1987 book, *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Limerick showed that the mix of symbolic and material interests, myths of manifest destiny and land rushes demanded a fundamental reconsideration of Western US history: Limerick showed that underneath the genuine clash of cultures in the open space of the West was the fight to claim material goods—gold, food, trading routes, and land.

Euro-Americans seldom glimpsed the complexity and integrity of Indian Cultures. This misunderstanding was certainly significant. Nonetheless, overstressed, it draws our attention away from the essential matter of property. All of the cultural understanding and tolerance in the world would not have changed the crucial fact that Indians possessed the land and that Euro-

⁸⁸ Jennifer Schuessler “Leader of Prestigious Yale Program Resigns, Citing Donor Pressure,” *The New York Times*: Sept. 30, 2021.

Americans wanted it.⁸⁹

Debates about stories and histories coincide with struggles for material power and resources. Whether to enrich the symbolic lives of society or to throw light on the struggle for material equity that may lie beneath the symbolic plane, a resilient, pluralistic, and free-thinking humanities system stands ready to engage.

⁸⁹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p. 190.

James Shulman is Vice President of the American Council of Learned Societies.

Eugene Tobin is a senior advisor to Ithaka S+R.

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun is Simon Fraser University's Canada 150 Research Chair in New Media, Professor in the School of Communication, and Director of the Digital Democracies Institute.

DaMaris Hill is a professor of creative writing, English, and African American studies at the University of Kentucky.

K. J. Rawson is a professor of English and women's, gender, and sexuality studies and Director of the Humanities Center at Northeastern University.

Ricardo Padrón is an associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Virginia.

Daniel Reid is Associate Director at the Getty Foundation.

Michael Roy is Dean of the Library at Middlebury College.

Charles Watkinson is Associate University Librarian for Publishing and Director, University of Michigan Press.