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Humanities' Place in the Community College

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Abstract

We argue that the humanities should remain a stalwart pillar within the American community college's curricular mission. A major function of the community college is transfer, and humanities courses are a major component of the transfer curricula. Even students engaged in career and technical education, which leads to direct employment, are ripe for humanities training, especially considering contemporary employer needs. We argue that removing the humanities from the community college is to fracture the democratic ideals of an informed citizenry, which could have grave consequences.

Introduction

We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance, . . . a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a worldwide crisis in education. (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 1-2)

Nussbaum wrote of the decline of the humanities in education, which has yet to be recognized as the emergency it has become. Within the last 30 years or so, higher education institutions have become increasingly vocationalized, especially community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 1982). At community colleges, where many students earn certificates, diplomas, and associate degrees for direct job placement and career advancement, the humanities seem to many a frivolity that can no longer be sustained. There are many reasons why some believe humanities courses should be removed from community college curriculum: they could potentially hold students back from earning a degree and becoming more employable; they are often not directly related to students' occupational majors; they cost underfunded community colleges valuable monetary, physical, and personnel resources; and they are sometimes elitist in content and delivery. And yet, these arguments do not address the perilous, fundamental shift in higher education from which they arise. The humanities ask students to engage with life, not to memorize facts. They require that students question society and its biases. They fight against the neoliberal agenda. They are central in teaching critical thinking and problem solving skills. That the humanities should have a strong presence at community colleges is a critical issue for society as a whole, now more than ever.

What Is a College Education without the Humanities?

The issue of whether the humanities (music, art, philosophy, literature, languages, history, and religious studies)—the core of liberal arts education—should remain at the heart of higher education is not new. The Yale Report (2008) is notable for its early defense of liberal education as a whole. The Harvard Committee (2008) argued specifically for the humanities in distinguishing between “the natural sciences and the humanities”: “The former describe, analyze, and explain; the latter appraise, judge, and criticize. In the first, a statement is judged as true or false; in the second, a result is judged as good or bad” (p. 256). Because our current society is so focused on objectification and quantification, the sciences have not been questioned as much as the humanities; however, as the Harvard Committee makes clear, both are necessary for a strong, healthy culture.

More recently, Delbanco's (2012) list of the five main qualities a college education should develop is the direct result of humanities instruction:

1. A skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past.
2. The ability to make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena.
3. Appreciation of the natural world, enhanced by knowledge of sciences and the arts.
4. A willingness to imagine experience from perspectives other than one's own.
5. A sense of ethical responsibility. (p. 3)

Additionally, Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) suggest that specialized occupational training carries great risk because society changes rapidly; further, the authors claim that if students are solely educated for careers, they will realize later that work alone does not create a fulfilling life. Community college students especially need to be convinced that higher education should be about more than a means to obtain a job (Anderson, 2013; Arnfield, 1968).

The Transfer Function of Community Colleges and the Need for the Humanities

Some academics believe that community colleges can best sustain their humanities offerings through the university transfer function (Cohen & Brawer, 1982). Transfer-minded students typically understand the necessity of taking these courses as many of them already plan on later attending four-year institutions. Some transfer students major in humanities disciplines at community colleges. Although Cejda, Kaylor, and Rewey's (1998) results were not statistically significant, there was a clear division between the GPAs of fine arts and humanities majors and other majors. Fine arts and humanities majors were most likely to see their GPAs rise when they attended universities. These results may have implications about fine arts and humanities majors' academic preparedness compared to other students; however, the authors suggested that additional research is needed to confirm this.

Clowes and Levin (1989) argued that the community college should concern itself with job training first and foremost for four reasons: (a) prepared students most often choose universities over community colleges; (b) community colleges do well in attracting vocational students; (c) community colleges mainly compete with proprietary institutions; and (d) community colleges' open-access mission does not mesh well with academic disciplines. However, what the authors failed to acknowledge is that many students begin at community colleges and later transfer to four-year institutions. It has been claimed that community colleges provide liberal arts instruction for almost half of the nation's college graduates (Jenkins, 2012); moreover, of the 1.25 million students per year who first attended a community college, at least 250,000—or one-fifth—eventually transfer to universities (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Because most universities still require students to take core courses, the community college cannot altogether remove the humanities or it will forsake its transfer function.

The Humanities and Skills Development

Nussbaum (2010) has argued strenuously for the humanities' place in college education because of the important qualities they develop in students, such as thinking critically. All too often, immediate, quantifiable results are sought in higher education, and the humanities can be easy to push aside because their effects often elude measurement and develop over time. As Nutting (2013) claimed, "These are essential skills that will benefit students for a lifetime, as citizens, as family members, as well as in their careers" (p. 70). Employers are often asked to rate certain skills' importance among employees, and although this is not a direct measure of the humanities' value, these surveys often function as quantitative "proof" of that value that is often demanded. Recently, employers noted they want colleges and universities to do a better job of teaching students to think critically, reason analytically, solve problems, apply knowledge in real-world settings, write and speak well, and make ethical decisions (Hart Research Associates, 2013). These skills are best developed in a humanities classroom.

Employers who want to hire employees with these skills do not just work at elite corporations and are not just responding to skills they want to see in top-level employees. A varied population of employers was surveyed, and "93% of employers agree that candidates' demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major" (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2014, para. 3). It is curious that colleges and universities continue to stress the importance of specialization and major selection to students when many reports provide evidence that employers want employees whom are trainable, can think critically, and have a broad range of knowledge (Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2013; Hart Research Associates, 2013).

Nevertheless, it appears that vocational specialization is a permanent fixture in American higher education. The question then arises whether the humanities should be tailored to serve the professions or should be offered as discrete fields to be studied. Many humanists and others in academia have said the humanities could best survive by

being absorbed into the occupational majors through interdisciplinary course offerings (Arnfield, 1968; Clowes & Levin, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 1982; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Nutting, 2013). However, this could be viewed as perverting the humanities to suit the vocations. Often, humanities courses are fashioned and revised to suit the desires of industry, and it is questionable whether employers truly want workers who think independently (Higginbottom, 1994). As Higginbottom argues if we want to see humanities as more than just workforce skills training at the community college, we “should remain committed to liberally educative general education curricula for students in all degree programs even in the face of fiscal, business, and governmental pressures” (p. 281). Cohen and Brawer (1982) agree on the importance of liberal arts at community colleges “if education is to maintain its function of acculturation, and if literacy retains any value” (p. 40). Surely we want to expose community college students to these benefits of humanities study.

The Humanities and Democracy

A democratic society needs an enlightened citizenry to sustain it. Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci, and Levy (2006) found a “connection between less prestigious institutions and high proportions of occupational-professional degrees” as well as “a particularly strong occupational emphasis in institutions enrolling high proportions of students with low test scores and, by implication, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds” (p. 173). The evidence that colleges are complicit in maintaining or even exacerbating class divisions cannot be ignored. The United States has a long history of reserving the liberal arts and humanities for the upper class whose members had the time, resources, and class positions to study in these areas (Samuelson, 2014). However, if the United States is truly dedicated to freedom and democracy, colleges (including, and perhaps especially, community colleges) must start devoting more attention and resources to the humanities.

According to Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014), many critics of occupational education believe that job training can and should be done by industry, and colleges and universities should have “broader social aims” (p. 318). These “broader aims” are often translated as the promotion of democratic ideals. There is no shortage of academics who believe in the power of higher education—and the humanities especially—to act as a strong democratizing force (Anderson, 2013; Ayers, 2008; Cohen & Brawer, 1982; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Delbanco, 2012; Higginbottom, 1994; Nussbaum, 2010; Samuelson, 2014). However, many of these academics also feel that the battle to retain higher education as an equalizing power is steadily being lost. According to Nussbaum (2010),

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. (p. 2)

There may indeed be nefarious aims in reducing exposure to the humanities in higher education. Samuelson (2014) argues that the upper class must think critically but simultaneously needs the lower class to simply follow instructions. It makes sense that “freedom of mind is dangerous if what is wanted is a group of technically trained obedient workers to carry out the plans of elites” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 21).

It is alarming to consider that community colleges, by stressing occupational degrees and devaluing humanist pursuits, may be complicit in the neoliberal agenda to heighten social stratification, but there is some evidence that this in fact may be the case. In his study of community college mission statements, Ayers (2008) found several examples of missions devoted entirely to workforce training. He claimed that “the discourse of economics has colonized the discourse of higher learning” (p. 120). He further cautioned that

The representation of community college education through neoliberal discourse [within their mission statements] (a) subordinates workers/learners to employers, thereby constituting identities of servitude, and (b) displaces the community and faculty in planning educational programs. . . . One danger of this development is that the curriculum is likely to become heavily laden with a market ideology that reinforces and reproduces power asymmetries among learners, their communities, faculty, and representatives of the private sector. (p. 124)

Again, if our country truly stands for democracy and opportunity, it will not shuttle low-income students into occupational programs and will not embrace business’ impact upon the community college at the expense of humanities education. It is a compelling irony that today, with more of the United States’ population attending college than ever before, higher education could be a less democratizing force than it has been in the past.

The Humanities at Community Colleges Today

According to Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014), “The prognosis for the liberal arts curriculum [within community colleges] is good” (p. 459). There are several innovative humanities initiatives being offered at community colleges around the country, including interdisciplinary programs, honors programs, Great Books programs, and digital

humanities and massive online open courses devoted to the humanities (Alford & Elden, 2013; Anderson, 2013; Berry & Eisenberg, 2014; Nutting, 2013). The existence of these programs strengthens the resolve many humanists feel to fight for their disciplines' place in higher education and gives hope to those who fear humanities leaders have acquiesced to the powerful forces that control community colleges.

Conclusion

Cohen and Brawer (1982) noted that "Only those who fail to understand the democratizing value of the liberal arts, the contributions they make to social cohesion, and the importance of these studies in everyone's life would deny them to the community college's clients" (p. 40). The humanities are college; they must remain to temper the amount of vocational courses students are now required to take. These courses must remain available to all students, and perhaps especially those who have traditionally been marginalized within business, society, and government. The humanities reside in the heart of not just the liberal arts or education, but of life itself. It is disturbing to imagine a college education without them. Community colleges should not just continue to offer humanities courses, but should work to strengthen current offerings to better serve their students and society at large. What if we returned to a focus on the humanities in college? How would society change? We are all more than someone else's workhorse, and it is time that institutions of higher education recognize this and value what makes us truly human.

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