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To Save the Humanities, Change the Narrative



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Christopher Panza and Richard Schur |

OCTOBER 20, 2014

In the classic children's story *Chicken Little*, the main character feels an acorn drop on her head and infers from this that the sky is falling. She announces the sky's imminent collapse to all the animals she encounters. Soon Chicken Little and her friends get an invitation into a fox's den to

escape the danger. The animals enter the den only to be devoured by the clever fox.

The story is a fitting allegory for the current state of the humanities. Humanists encounter a constant stream of articles proclaiming a "crisis in the humanities." They are rooted in the alleged high unemployment rate and low pay of humanities graduates, the collapse of the number of humanities majors, and the shrinkage of the discipline's total tenure-track positions and programs. Each article is a potential falling acorn that could be interpreted as evidence that the sky is falling. As a humanist, it's hard to resist the urge to run into a cave for cover.

Interestingly, although programs and tenure-track lines may in fact be under stress, actual data do not support the overall crisis narrative. Unemployment rates and salaries in the humanities are near the median for all majors, and salaries for graduates in philosophy, English, and history are higher than the median. Following a drop in total major numbers in the 1970s, humanities degrees have remained constant. However, these data seem to have little effect on the humanities' detractors, and the narrative that they weave about the demise and irrelevance of the humanities can seem impervious to empirical reality. Unfortunately, false crisis narratives have real effects.

Here at Drury, we saw those effects become reality a few years ago. Despite the rhetoric of integrating the liberal arts and professional education, strategic planning and institutional marketing seemed to focus on everything but the humanities. Although close to 20 percent of our students majored in a humanities field, those programs gained little attention or financial support. This was no antihumanities conspiracy. Rather, the sheer persistence of the crisis narrative led the humanities to be simply overlooked. Drury's humanities professors responded with collective despondency, hunkered down in their separate departments, protecting the few crumbs they had out of despair and frustration.

Eventually, we regrouped. We held several rounds of conversations, discussed the actual data, and formed a reading group that examined Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. A number of us emerged from those discussions brainstorming ways to change the narrative. We knew we had to be armed with data to counter misconceptions but also realized that this was not enough. We needed to reinvigorate the humanities at our own institution and display their value and meaning.

Our guiding insight was that the humanities were weakened by being seen as a series of small, disconnected, discrete programs. The institution was asking whether English or history mattered to the university, not whether the humanities did. This is not the situation in the sciences. Institutions do not begin by asking whether biology or chemistry matter because these are seen as parts of the sciences, and everyone knows why the sciences matter to the university. In contrast, the humanities were splintered, lacking a powerful unifying message or brand. If we could articulate that larger brand, we could go from defense to offense, changing and taking charge of the narrative on our campus by displaying why the humanities mattered.

This meant rejecting the temptation to isolate ourselves from one another. We pooled departmental budgets to fund a humanities speaker series, developed shared curricular programming, and won grants written by faculty members working across departmental lines. These efforts helped us to craft a unified message and to demonstrate that investments in the humanities would have a broad impact on both individual departments and on the culture of the entire institution.

As we forged ahead, we created more high-visibility efforts, engaging in what we jokingly called a universitywide "photo bombing" campaign. In one significant example, a historic residential property on campus became available for use, and we seized the opportunity to create a Humanities House where humanities students could live and learn together. It stands as the only discipline-focused, engaged-learning residential experience on campus and receives far more applications per year than there are spots. Slowly the name and message of the humanities started to become regularly heard in conversations around campus.

The Humanities House also serves as the physical home for our new Humanities and Ethics Center. To promote it, we started a blog, called Human, All-Too-Human (in honor of Nietzsche). We invited faculty members from each humanities department, along with the Humanities House residents, to write blog entries. To our surprise, almost all the humanities faculty members participated, and in the beginning we posted new blog entries every two to three days. With students in the Humanities House deploying a marketing campaign on Facebook and Twitter, our readership expanded beyond the university to across the country and even to other parts of the world. This year we've added posts from alumni, members of the university's Board of Trustees, and from scholars across the entire institution.

We've been busy with other things, too. This past year, we created short video clips, called HumCasts, explaining the importance of our humanities scholarship and the centrality of humanities inquiry. In addition, we've created a yearly book series and established a

partnership with a local film house to host public screenings and discussions about classic films with strong humanistic content. We also host a regular discussion series about shared issues in humanities pedagogy, attended by both faculty members and students. All these activities, some of which other colleges were doing, have helped to create a unified humanities culture here that was completely absent just a few short years ago.

Transforming ourselves in this way has altered our way of thinking. We used to see strategic plans, advisory boards, and development efforts as standard practices only for business schools. No longer. With every new program, excitement about the value and relevance of the humanities—from students, faculty members, and even the administration—continues to bubble up.

Yes, the acorns continue to drop, here in Missouri and throughout the country—but at Drury we've learned to take charge of the narrative. It's no longer one of crisis, but one of opportunity. We hope other humanities departments join us in the open air.

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