

The New Humanities

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By JEFFREY J. WILLIAMS

The humanities, we're often told, are dying. And yet, even as traditional majors like English and history are indeed shrinking, the past decade has also seen the rise of a new kind of humanities, including a wave of hybrid fields such as the digital humanities, environmental humanities, energy humanities, global humanities, urban humanities, food humanities, medical humanities, legal humanities, and public humanities.

These new alloys emphasize commerce between other disciplines, particularly STEM or professional fields, and humanistic ways of thinking. And they're not just adding new intellectual perspectives; a substantial institutional infrastructure has materialized to support them, yielding new programs, journals, book series, conferences, courses, degrees, and (most importantly) jobs. All of this indicates that these new hybrids are not the products of some momentary fad: They're here to stay.

A few of them, like the digital humanities, have gotten a good deal of press, but their larger confluence has not. While they each vary in focus and field, what do they all add up to? And what do the new humanities mean for the shape of the university itself? Let's look at them in turn.

Going Digital

The **digital humanities** (DH) has cast a sizable footprint in qualitative disciplines like literary studies and history, importing methods from computing, statistics, information science, and demography. A DH project, for instance, might comb a database of titles of British novels to ascertain that such titles grew demonstrably shorter in the 19th century, probably because of serialization and the pressures of a changing publishing industry. DH has garnered a lion's share of funding via initiatives from the Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, encouraging further research and, especially, graduate training. In turn, DH has found its way into a great many courses, certificates, research projects, and new jobs, and germinated at least 35 devoted programs and seven new journals, such as *Cultural Analytics*. Much like "literary theory" in the 1970s and '80s, the digital humanities has become a standard part of graduate education: A grad student can't go on the job market without it.

Environmentally Conscious

Perhaps the most socially concerned effort has developed around the **environmental humanities**. Drawing especially on the life sciences, but also on disciplines like geology, economics, and engineering, it looks at the human aspects of environmental issues — particularly climate change. For instance, Princeton professor Rob Nixon underscores the “slow violence” of many environmental problems, especially those that disproportionately harm the poor. Environmental humanities has spawned dedicated programs, centers, and initiatives, a number of undergraduate majors, myriad courses across fields, and a major organization, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. Like the digital humanities, it has also prompted a great deal of new research, journals, and anthologies to carry it. Some environmental studies use digital techniques, but for the most part the “D” in DH centers on method, whereas the “environmental” in environmental humanities centers more on subject, especially the cultural and social effects of ecological change.

Worldly Humanities

Like the environmental humanities, the energy, food, global, and urban humanities draw on humanistic ways to address major social topics. The **energy humanities** concentrates on specific resources and emphasizes the way that capitalism and energy shape our culture. The **global humanities** underscores the patterns of migration of people and the networks around the world through which goods are manufactured and distributed and labor dispersed, and the **urban humanities** focuses on metropolises. They have intersecting concerns with the environmental humanities, particularly in regard to exposing the circulation of waste and productive resources around the world, and the dynamic ecologies of cities. And the **food humanities** similarly attends to webs of production and distribution, although it might focus more on the cultures attached to food. Although not to the same extent as the digital and environmental humanities, the promise of these hybrid fields has materialized in institutions, initiatives, or research groups, such as the Academy of Global Humanities and Critical Theory, co-sponsored by the universities of Virginia, Duke, and Bologna; or the Rice Center for Energy and Environmental Research in the Human Sciences.

Humanizing Law and Medicine

Two wings of the new humanities have also developed in medicine and law. Emergent programs and journals in the medical humanities bring humanistic perspectives to medical education, offering doctors and nurses the chance to explore ways of knowing beyond the purely scientific. “We realize that the care of the sick unfolds in stories,” Columbia’s division of narrative medicine notes, and the tools developed in the **medical humanities** can help medical professionals zero in on more successful treatments. There has been a similar impetus in law, seeded by initiatives such as the Mellon Fellowship for legal humanities research, several programs in law and the humanities, and journals such as the Yale Journal

of Law and the Humanities. The **legal humanities** emphasize the fact that law is never just a technical pursuit, and that humanistic frames of analysis add depth to our understanding of the effects of law in practice.

Reaching Outside Academe

Lastly, rather than importing STEM procedures into the humanities or using the humanities to augment work in other disciplines, the **public humanities** aims to represent what the humanities themselves are doing to a wider public. It charges disciplines like English, foreign languages, history, and philosophy to explain their research outside the confines of their academic fields, drawing on lessons from journalism, public relations, and marketing. It revolves around a push to publish on otherwise specialist matters in mainstream magazines or newspapers, to engage with community organizations or other groups, large and small, and to promote the academic humanities more widely. Receiving a major boost from the NEH and from professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association, the public humanities has led to the establishment of a number of centers, programs, book series, and training seminars for graduate students and faculty.

The overall momentum of these new initiatives seems to testify to the vitality, rather than morbidity, of the humanities today. Indeed, one can already envision further hybrids on the horizon: Business humanities? Criminal justice humanities? Design humanities? Couldn't engineering use the humanities?

The new humanities heed the call for interdisciplinarity that has sounded over the past 30 years, bridging institutional barriers, conjoining otherwise distant fields, and spurring new knowledge. They show that the humanities do make a distinctive and essential contribution to knowledge production, as Jonathan Kramnick has argued. However, Kramnick makes this assertion in an effort to defend the autonomy of the humanities, whereas these developments point to their dependence on other disciplines. So, what else is behind the push to establish the "plus-humanities"?

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From the outside, the rise of these various new fields might seem like a sign of evolutionary progress for traditional disciplines. Still, in many cases, the humanities don't have equal standing with the applied disciplines; they're more like a garnish, an add-on, valued only insofar as they link with and augment those other disciplines. Thus, these yokings tend to quell the independent, critical role of the humanities as an interrogative force for human values, principles, and history. A coal-company-funded engineering project, for instance, might be glad to hear about the heroic image of the miner in art and literature, but it is

unlikely to welcome questions about labor and capitalism. In their effort to accommodate other disciplines, the humanities themselves may be co-opted and lose the very critical independence that defines them.

As Rob Nixon told me in an interview for *The Iowa Review*, one danger in the environmental humanities is that, “On the surface you have a scaling up of the humanities as a partner in this big endeavor involving engineering, geosciences, life sciences, social sciences, and policy. But there is sometimes a risk of humanities scholars entering into partnerships uncritically, in ways that become complicit with the neoliberal agendas of universities.”

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We tend to invoke interdisciplinarity as an inherently good thing, but not all interdisciplinarity is alike. The idea of interdisciplinarity assumes parity among disciplines — it takes for granted that the university is comprised of relatively equal, autonomous areas that comprise a federated whole. But the rise of the new humanities, in fact, belies a shift in the structure of the university that enables the applied disciplines — or the entrepreneurial wings of other disciplines — to dominate and often determine the focus of academic projects across disciplines.

The figure of “the two cultures” is often invoked to explain the position of the humanities now, as if it were a rivalry between the humanities and sciences — with the humanities the old-fashioned holdouts against the advances of the sciences. But the “pure” sciences are also under duress. A theoretical physicist will have as much difficulty getting a decent academic job as a literary theorist. If there are two cultures now, it is the now-dominant applied disciplines versus those in the arts and sciences — or, more bluntly, the entrepreneurial on the one hand and the academic on the other.

This is often said to be necessary because the applied disciplines go out and pay the bills, while the humanities stay at home and live off them. But the irony here, as Christopher Newfield shows in his studies of the California system, is that applied disciplines like engineering do not fund the humanities, as the myth goes; in fact, they typically are supported by the grunt work of all the teaching in the arts and sciences.

The humanities were the classical core of higher education. Through the 18th and 19th centuries, the ground of higher education was Greek and Latin. That started changing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the rise of most of our contemporary disciplines and the invention of electives.

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But even with the growing prestige of science and the expansion of higher education after World War II, the humanities were considered a cornerstone, essential to the development of any well-educated person. Whatever the limitations of that era, the humanities inculcated

common ideas and values, and a company executive, a schoolteacher, and an engineer would have had similar undergraduate training.

While the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s vied over the content of the humanities, their very fierceness bespoke the humanities' importance, with the columnist George Will declaring that Lynne Cheney, then chairperson of the NEH, had a more important job than her husband, then secretary of defense. Whatever else they fought about, conservatives and progressives agreed about the centrality of humanistic culture.

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One upshot of that moment was the rise of cultural studies, and it is illuminating to compare it to the current rise of the new humanities. Both promote breaking down disciplinary walls and using techniques and knowledges from various disciplines, but cultural studies has tended to bring together neighboring disciplines in the humanities and arts, or cousins in the qualitative social sciences, like cultural anthropology and ethnography. Moreover, cultural studies emphasizes the value of the cultural — which the humanities have particular provenance over.

They differ in their social stances, too. Historically, the traditional humanities presented an alternative to the commercial market, seeing human value as more important than (and without equivalence to) mercantile values. More recently, cultural studies tends to criticize, if not directly oppose, the commercial market. Some wings of the new humanities, like the environmental humanities, have affinities with cultural studies, but others tend to be less critical, and more readily accommodate — or reproduce — mercantile values.

The new humanities augur the shape of the university to come. Rather than a confederation of sizable, semi-autonomous departments, they suggest a looser organizational structure of small, mobile teams formed on demand for particular funded projects. In organizational theory, this is generally called a network structure, as opposed to the divisional structure common in the 20th-century university.

The idea of a network seems much more open than the vertical flow chart of the traditional divisional model, with scholars freed from disciplinary constraints to interact across a horizontal plane. However, it glides over the structure of power. While interactions might be on a level field and no one wears a tie, the new model of academic employment is decidedly vertical: At the top is the administrator or project head, who draws together a team to address a problem to be solved, with much of the team on demand and underemployed rather than in decent, secure positions. Moreover, the problem might come from what businesses, nonprofits, or other groups bring to them, rather than from their autonomous

decisions. This will be hailed as a virtue because it connects academic work to the outside world and generates funds, basically following the model of some scientific and entrepreneurial research now.

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This model has benefits from a transactional standpoint, but one likely consequence is that other kinds of research, particularly disciplinary research in non-mercantile fields, will be left to languish. Whatever the virtues of working together collaboratively, one limitation is that such work gravitates to assigned projects, attached to grants or other transactions, rather than independent, open, individual exploration.

Another consequence will likely be the steepening of the structure of academic labor. We have, of course, already experienced a turn toward adjunctification, as a majority of professorial positions have been refashioned as non-tenureable and at will. However, most calls for reform — which I'm all for — tend to assume the divisional model of professors filling departments.

With the past two generations experiencing this reconfiguration of academic labor, the cultural memory of full employment and faculty control has faded, and the new normal will be unapologetically tiered. A classic definition held that the university was the corporate body of the faculty; they were the long-term core that sustained it and that those who passed through its doors encountered. Now we have a different sense of the corporate and the hierarchy of a large-scale company.

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To be clear, this is not a call for a return to some mythic ivory tower. Frequently, prognosticators claim that the university is frozen in time, which is why it needs "innovation." But that is a straw man: If there is a law of the history of the American university, it is that it has continually changed throughout its history. Early iterations of the university, for instance, adapted to colonial society by training ministers and others; the rise of industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the promulgation of engineering and research; and after World War II, universities opened to a far greater breadth of students, largely through public funding, as well as conducting advanced research.

The new humanities, I believe, represent another stage of adaptation. The issue, though, is who and what these crossovers serve, who has control, and what their aims are. Those are still in contest.

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