

Revitalizing the humanities with general education (opinion)

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As students have returned to campus at many of our leading research universities this fall, the usual contingent of new doctoral candidates in literature, history and other humanistic fields is not among them. During the pandemic, as tuition revenues fell and mitigation costs rose, the largest share ^[1] of graduate programs to suspend admissions was in the arts and humanities. When those programs resume, Ph.D. students will face an academic job market even more dire than it was before COVID.

Yet while humanities programs have been cut ^[2], the pandemic has confirmed how urgently faculty members are needed to engage undergraduates with humanistic questions. The public health crisis of the last 18 months -- and counting -- is also a values crisis. It raises difficult moral, political and historical problems: How should the risk of illness be balanced with the cost of quarantines and closures? How can individual liberties be reconciled with the public good? How can we explain the history of America's savage inequities in health care and quality of life?

The aftermath of this crisis will be the prelude to the next. A collective reckoning will be impossible without the context and capacities cultivated by the humanities. Yet the ranks of undergraduates studying the humanities are thinning ^[3], and graduate students aspiring to become humanities faculty face meager employment ^[4] prospects.

In response to these challenges, the Teagle Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities launched Cornerstone: Learning for Living ^[5] to restore the humanities -- and thereby humanities professors -- to a central role in undergraduate education. The Cornerstone model provides a gateway general education course for first-year college students that creates a common experience through discussion of inspiring works of poetry, fiction, argument and oratory. It also provides pathways through general education via upper-level courses that connect humanistic texts and questions with the careers to which more and more students aspire -- in such fields as business, technology and health sciences. The model holds significant promise for expanding teaching opportunities for current and new humanities faculty.

Since its inception a year ago, over 30 institutions ^[6] around the country -- from private research universities like Stanford University ^[7] to public two-year institutions like SUNY Onondaga Community College ^[8] -- are in the planning or implementation phases of adapting the Cornerstone model. By

embedding the model into the existing structure of general education, institutions need not attempt wholesale restructuring of their curricula, which is often a deal breaker in efforts at reform.

At [Purdue University](#) ^[9], for instance, where humanities enrollments had been [sagging](#) ^[10], humanities and STEM faculty developed a 15-credit certificate called Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts, beginning with a two-semester gateway sequence on Transformative Texts -- including works by such authors as Plato, Dante, Mary Shelley, W. E. B. Du Bois and Toni Morrison -- that meets existing universitywide written and oral communication requirements. They also identified thematically related clusters (e.g., Technology and Society) of new or existing courses that help students confront technical issues from humanistic perspectives while meeting existing distribution requirements. Students who complete the gateway and three upper-level courses earn a certificate that goes on their transcript with no detour away from timely degree completion.

A different adaptation of the Cornerstone model is underway at [Austin Community College](#) ^[11], where faculty created the Great Questions Seminar -- a gateway course fulfilling the student success course requirement that is increasingly the norm at community colleges. Students in all sections of the seminar encounter a common set of readings, starting with *The Odyssey*, as aids to reflection on the personal journey on which they are embarking. Subsequently, to complete a designated track through distribution requirements called the "great questions journey," they can take courses that span from government, history and Mexican American studies to theater and speech. All courses in the track focus on primary texts and make general education more coherent for students.

At Purdue, instructors in all sections of the gateway sequence are free to teach texts of their own choosing but are asked to assign at least half their choices from a list of works developed and periodically revised by those teaching in the first-year sequence. That strategy gives the course both variety and commonality and minimizes discord over what books should or should not be taught. Instructors meet regularly in workshops led by experienced teachers who speak about how they make specific readings exciting for first-year students. At Austin Community College, new instructors are also welcomed into the collaborative effort through workshops in which they share in-class exercises and assignments related to the common readings.

The response from students has been remarkable. Purdue piloted its two-semester gateway humanities sequence in 2014 with 60 students; it now attracts 4,000 students, 80 percent of whom plan to major in engineering or other pre-professional fields. At Austin Community College, the Great Questions Seminar grew from a pilot with 30 students in fall 2016 to over 625 students by the 2020-21 academic year. Students report that the common intellectual experience of the gateway course, coming at the moment they arrive in college, helps them build community at a time when feelings of isolation run high and they are [hungry for connection](#) ^[12] with one another.

The gateway humanities courses are paying for themselves in the form of improved retention of first-year students. Purdue's College of Liberal Arts is now seeking to staff at least 150 sections of the first-year gateway humanities sequence each academic year; 60 percent of instructors are tenured or on the tenure track in the humanities. To help staff those courses, the College of Liberal Arts has

hired 18 new full-time instructors for 2021-22 and will be conducting searches for another eight instructors for the following academic year, all on renewable appointments. And in a bold new policy, new tenure-track hires at the College of Liberal Arts are required to devote at least half their teaching to the gateway sequence, with no ill effects on recruitment.

At Austin Community College, interest in teaching the Great Questions Seminar figures prominently in new full-time faculty hires in the humanities. Moreover, the gateway courses kindle student interest in additional humanities courses. These are early signs that the Cornerstone: Learning for Living program model is helping to create rewarding employment opportunities for humanities Ph.D. students.

Cornerstone is not a panacea for the deep and recalcitrant problems of the academic humanities, including the long-standing need to reconceive graduate education [13]. But it is a promising effort to reach undergraduates who seek respite from the pre-professional treadmill and crave time for reflection. And for graduate students, it represents a chance to get a meaningful job on a renewable appointment, teaching in and beyond their chosen fields.

Some people will object. They will say this is a route to second-class academic citizenship because it emphasizes introductory teaching over advanced research. But in the age of STEM, there's no better way to attract students into humanities classes than through general education. Humanities faculty need to go where the students are, not wait for the students to come back to them.

In his forthcoming book, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation*, Roosevelt Montás, longtime director of the core curriculum at Columbia University and member of the advisory council [14] for Cornerstone: Learning for Living, sums up the case: "Putting serious liberal arts programs at the center of the undergraduate curriculum will not only inspire more students to major in the liberal arts, but will reinvigorate the professoriate and reverse the precipitous decline in faculty jobs in the humanities." General education is the place to start.

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Links

[1] <https://cgsnet.org/cgs-research-brief-impact-covid-19-graduate-education-access-selected-results-2020-nagapcgs-survey>

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/26/us/colleges-coronavirus-budget-cuts.html>

[3] <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/bachelors-degrees-humanities>

[4] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/upshot/academic-job-crisis-phd.html>

[5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/09/30/colleges-must-revive-general-education-opinion>

[6] <https://www.teaglefoundation.org/Grants-Initiatives/Grants-Database/?cat=Cornerstone:%20Learning%20for%20Living>

[7] <https://www.teaglefoundation.org/How-We-Grant/Grants-Database/Grants/Cornerstone-Learning-for-Living/Implementing-a-Common-Intellectual-Experience-and>

[8] <https://www.teaglefoundation.org/How-We-Grant/Grants-Database/Grants/Cornerstone-Learning-for-Living/Launching-the-Enduring-Question-Pathway-at-OCC>

[9] <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/cornerstone/index.html>

[10] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00091383.2019.1674107>

[11] <https://instruction.austincc.edu/thegreatquestions/>

[12] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/03/30/college-students-mental-health-pandemic/>

[13] <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/fixing-humanities-phd-job-crisis>

[14] <https://www.teaglefoundation.org/Call-for-Proposals/Initiatives/Cornerstone>