

What's Wrong With the Humanities?

[Bruce Cole](#)¹

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Let's face it: Too many humanities scholars are alienating students and the public with their opacity, triviality, and irrelevance. A good case in point is this passage from [an interview](#) about [Manifesto for the Humanities](#), a recent book by the director of an institute for the humanities at a major US university:

Writing this book, I came to see the new scholar subject as a performative of passionate singularity, hybrid materiality and networked relationality. This is one sense in which the humanities scholar that is becoming is possibly posthuman, and a posthumanist scholar. The locus of thinking, for the prosthetically extendable scholar joined along the currents of networked relationality, is an ensemble affair.

There's no denying the importance of the humanities, but this sort of writing and thinking gives us a pretty good picture of why so many academics are alienating those who could benefit most from them.

It is undeniable that, for centuries, the humanities have made important contributions to other fields of inquiry, such as medicine, law, and engineering, to cite just a few. Ideally, university administrators, business executives, foundation directors, policymakers and many others — both in the private sector and in state and federal government — can and should benefit from the knowledge and wisdom embedded in the humanities. Unfortunately, these people are increasingly alienated from studying them in our colleges and universities.

I saw this as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency chartered to bring their benefits to all Americans. This gave me an up-close and personal view of the state of the humanities on the national level. That experience fortified my faith in their importance, but it also left me with serious doubts about how their values and knowledge are being transmitted.

Let me explain. The chairman is, by law, the only person in the agency who decides what gets funded. Recommendations for awards are made by peer review panels composed mainly of academics. These recommendations are then sent to the National Council on the Humanities, a board made up of twenty-six scholars and citizen members. The Council then makes its own recommendations and sends these on to the chairman, who then makes the final, and only, decision on the disbursement of funds.

Because I had to personally approve every grant, I attended hundreds and hundreds of peer review panels to be sure that I made informed decisions. I also read thousands of applications. Over the seven years I served as chairman, this gave me a unique overview of all the humanities disciplines, but for the sake of brevity, I will confine my observations to the content of applicants for NEH research fellowships. About half of all applications to the NEH are for such fellowships, most from humanities professors at the nation's colleges and universities. On average, only about 8 percent of these are funded.

My experience with these applications was, to put it mildly, disappointing. The weaknesses and trends I observed in them are worth examining because they illustrate larger problems in today's academy.

¹ Bruce Cole is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, DC. Between 2001 and 2009, he was chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. He is a former Distinguished Professor at Indiana University and the author of fourteen books.

Obscurity is Not an Intellectual Virtue

Huge numbers of applications were written, and written badly, in fashionable and impenetrable jargon. The opacity of academic prose, much of it couched in unfathomable theory-speak (such as the prattled quote above), has long been the subject of discussion, and even mockery, much of it well deserved.

In some parts of the academy, such obscurantist writing is seen as a sign of brilliance, but that's something I never understood. I suppose I'm very old-fashioned in believing that clear writing is the result of clear thought and that the use of jargon is sometimes the lazy way to avoid hard thinking. Whatever the cause, too many books and articles written by humanities professors are needlessly opaque. Moreover, great numbers of the applications I read dealt with amazingly tiny fragments of the applicants' fields, a sort of atomization of inquiry.

Now, I am not against deep dives into seemingly arcane subjects. There was no more fervent defender and supporter of funds for *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* or *The Sumerian Dictionary* than I, because these seemingly obscure reference works advance and enrich our knowledge of their important subjects. The problem was, however, that many of the fellowship proposals asked for support for projects that did neither. They were simply frivolous and added no discernible value to their fields of study. Not all knowledge is equally useful; successful applications offered projects that were understandable and were likely to make an important impact on and contribution to humanities studies.

Equally disappointing was the fact that large numbers of applications stuck to the deeply grooved paths first trod by the postmodern humanities of the sixties and seventies. There was a uniformity, and conservatism, among them that indicated a lack of fresh thinking. Instead of advancing new ideas, such proposals left me with a feeling that their shelf lives had expired years before. Whatever their subjects, applicants often viewed their research exclusively through the same predictable lens of race, class, gender, theory, or some trivial aspects of popular culture. New and original approaches to the various areas of the humanities were all too rare.

Many of the applications were also heavily weighted toward the advocacy of one cause or another. The NEH charter forbids the funding of such applications, but it would be a mistake not to see them as a reflection of the weaponization of the academic humanities for the promotion of social or political agendas, something I'm sure we all frown upon.

Beyond the Ivory Tower

The one major innovation I witnessed was the beginning of the serious and promising use of the Internet and digital technology for the research and diffusion of humanities subjects. I consider this one of the most promising, but still under-utilized, new developments for the improvement of humanities studies. This was particularly encouraging to me because, as chairman of the NEH, I took seriously the agency's mission to promote the wide dissemination of the humanities to all our citizens. Not enough humanities scholarship reaches outside the academy to influence the movers and shakers who inform public policy.

Now, not all scholars can or should be writing for the general public, but more should try. Take history, for example. Not so long ago, academic scholars were writing books that were well received and widely read by the general public. Today — with only rare exceptions — it's journalists who pen the books read by thousands of general readers. It's certainly true that some of their work is based on academic research, but the reason their books do well is that they are trained to write compelling narratives. They write books that people actually want to read.

The work of many academic humanists remains within the Ivory Tower precisely because they write only for other scholars within their own subspecialties. This trend is exacerbated by the tenure review process, which usually rewards peer reviewed scholarship in academic venues, but looks askance at books and articles with a more popular appeal.

Bad Teaching Threatens the Future of the Humanities

As a former member of a tenure committee, and as a member of the board of trustees of a large public university, I saw that these committees give too much attention to research and too little to excellent teaching. Teaching is, after all, one of the most important vehicles for transmitting the humanities to future world-shapers.

There's an aphorism that goes something like, "Research is to teaching like sin is to confession: without one, you can't have the other." But much of the research detailed in so many applications to the NEH had such a tenuous link with the applicants' teaching responsibilities that it was impossible to discern the connection between the two. This is why I instituted a new NEH grant competition to support research directly connected to the applicants' teaching.

It's no secret that humanities departments across the country have witnessed a decline in enrollment. One study has found that from 1970 to 2004 enrollments in English departments slipped from 7.6 percent of undergraduate majors to 3.9 percent, and that history declined from 18.5 percent to 10.7 percent. There's been significant slippage in other humanities departments as well. In one generation, [according to the same study](#), the number of "those majoring in the humanities dropped from a total of 30 percent to a total of less than 16 percent." This is unfortunate. Future lawyers, scientists, doctors, and engineers should be taking these courses and using what they learn to help them apply the benefits of humanities knowledge to their creative endeavors.

I believe that a significant amount of this decline has occurred because students are alienated by the unimportance and irrelevance of parts of the humanities curriculum. In other words, they are detecting and rejecting the same attributes that I observed as I read NEH applications.

It's Not Just about Money

Many in the humanities establishment would disagree with this diagnosis. Instead, they place the blame for the decline of the humanities on the rise of the business major, a growing emphasis on STEM fields, and parents who want to pay only for a major that they think will get their kids a lucrative job. Obviously, there is some truth to these observations. Still, it seems clear that the humanities profession has not made a strong enough case for its own importance and, ultimately, for the prospering of humanities departments in colleges and universities. This is a shame. There are many excellent, sensible, and creative scholars who need to make a better argument for a profession that is usually their passion as well as their career.

Periodically, there are studies from the academy bemoaning this "Crisis of the Humanities." In my opinion, such reports ignore or gloss over the current problems of humanities research and teaching. They willfully ignore the root of the problem, which is the declining state of the humanities in their own institutions, for which they must shoulder much of the blame.

I'm afraid that the NEH is responsible for part of this. It has failed, especially over the last few years, to fulfill its principal charge: to promote the humanities to all American citizens. Its grant-giving structure is sclerotic. It has changed little since the NEH's inception half a century ago, while the last five decades have witnessed a major sea change in the humanities. It is an aging and antiquated agency much in need of major reform or, if that proves impossible, privatization or even elimination.

Indeed, over the last few years, the NEH's funding, and its very existence, has come under attack from some members of Congress who claim, not always unreasonably, that it is a federal taxpayer-funded agency that mainly serves cultural elites. This is not the first time this has happened, but what is new is that, aside from its lobbyists and several university presidents, the NEH now has so few defenders.

This says volumes not only about the NEH, but support for the humanities in general. The situation will not improve until those alarmed at what has happened to their field start making a case, beyond their own professional interests, for this essential part of our culture and society.