

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

Office of the President
Office of Academic Affairs

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A PROPOSAL FOR THE HUMANITIES

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The University of Wyoming's areas of distinction as identified in its strategic plans include "cultural assets, arts, and humanities." In our current plan, UP3, the action items within this area address the first two of these elements, specifically the Art Museum, AHC, University Libraries, and relationships with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. As we prepare to draft University Plan 4 we must develop measures that can strengthen and promote the third of these elements, the humanities, and we must devise action items that will accomplish our university goals for the humanities.

To begin a discussion on the role of the humanities, both at UW and in a wider context, we invite faculty to consider the following questions:

1. What are the humanities, and who at UW engages in them?

The 1965 National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act defines humanities as including, "the study of language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life" (<http://www.neh.gov/howeare/legislation.html>). How should this definition be modified to describe the humanities at UW? To what extent should our thinking about the humanities be constrained by current departmental boundaries?

2. What is the role of the humanities, both at UW and in a national and global context?

Some voices in the national discourse about humanities in higher education seem to concede that science and technology are the drivers of a competitive economy. The resource-intensive conduct of most scientific and technological disciplines can reinforce this perception. Yet the humanities belong to the core educational mission of virtually every public institution of higher learning, and as fields of scholarship they are thriving. Their educational value is well established: the humanities offer historical perspectives, ways of knowing, insights that are not available through other disciplines, and critical analytical skills of great relevance to today's problems and opportunities. They help develop well-educated citizens who embody ethical and democratic ideals and who sustain the cultural and interpersonal fabric of society. The case for vibrant scholarship in the humanities may be less prominent in public discourse, but it is compelling nevertheless. As Sir Andrew Motion, Poet Laureate of Britain (1999-2009), affirmed in his June 2, 2011 Romanes Lecture at Oxford entitled, "Bonfire of the Humanities: Why the Humanities Matter":

The arts, and the humanities associated with them, provide us with the paradoxes that we depend on for the realisation and fulfilment of ourselves as human beings. Nothing less. They are the means by which we learn to live more deeply as ourselves, but they are also the echo-chambers in which we begin to understand what it means to live in history. They pay attention to events, but they make their own narrative of those events. They teach us about ourselves while they allow us to forget ourselves and – just as fulfillingly – to identify with others. They affirm the value of oblique truths as well as the usefulness of direct utterance. They honour familiar life while transfiguring it, and they give the clearest possible view of what lies beyond our seeing and saying. They help us to continue living because they keep death in view. Are these self-evident truths? I would say so. But this doesn't mean we are excused from affirming, defending, cherishing and broadcasting them.

UW humanities faculty need to accept this challenge, confident that, if successful, their voices will be heard.

3. How should UW humanities faculty contribute to our baccalaureate general education requirements?

During the 2010-11 academic year a UW task force on learning outcomes for the baccalaureate made recommendations that will be considered further this coming year by a committee to revise UW's USP requirements. This second committee may find it very useful to have a clear understanding of the central role of the humanities in undergraduate general education and how humanities expertise may be incorporated into the new program.

In particular, how can the humanities provide the training for critical and creative thinking, ethical reasoning, and problem-solving that helps to produce responsible individuals who contribute to civic society? For example, by learning to answer questions such as, "who is the better artist, Georgia O'Keeffe or Diego Rivera, and why" students develop skills to evaluate more politically and emotionally charged questions, carefully and critically. Furthermore, as Shelley asserted in *A Defence of Poetry* (1840), a civilized state committed to justice depends upon a society skilled in empathy, empathy that may best be developed through study of the humanities.

4. Should we establish a UW "Center for the Humanities"?

Some universities have institutes that bring together humanities faculty in support of scholarship and instruction. These centers range considerably in size and scope, from the scholarly focus of University of Edinburgh's Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities to the gathering place represented by Western Michigan University's University Center for the Humanities. Some initiatives, such as Duke's "Humanities Writ Large," seek to reverse declining enrollments in the humanities. (Duke's effort is supported by a \$6M grant from the Mellon Foundation.)

Should UW create a center for the humanities? What would be its purpose, mission, and activities? Could this center serve as a forum where UW connects with other organizations, such as the Wyoming Council for the Humanities, or the Library of Congress Center for the Book, or the Neltje Center and Jentel Foundation? Are there specific initiatives that UW should pursue through such a center, potentially with external funding, such as thematic programs, named lectures, high profile symposia, Oxford Union-style intellectual debates, or prizes and awards? Might such a center provide a nexus for interdisciplinary research, teaching, and service? Is there — or should there be — something distinctive about the way the humanities are pursued at UW, similar in spirit to the distinctive foci that several sectors of the science and engineering faculty have identified for their disciplines?

The Future of the Humanities at UW

It may be possible to congregate certain humanities activities, along with a number of UW humanities faculty members, in a physical space that will become available within 3 to 4 years. For this to become reality requires discussion, evaluation of various ideas, development of a plan, and incorporation of that plan into UP4. We'd like to start the discussion with some brainstorming sessions in the coming months, and we look forward to the results of our collective creative thinking.