

**“Revitalizing Humanities: Expanding the Vision of Liberal Education”**

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**Introduction**

Please forgive me if I begin on a slightly querulous note. I need to take some exception to the description of this session contained in the program (and completely unfairly, I might add, since I didn't take responsibility for producing this myself): “Does study of the humanities *somehow* prepare students for deeper engagement with the central issues of living and working in a complex and interdependent world?” With such a formulation, I'm surprised that you *somehow* decided to spend your valuable time at this session. Perhaps you hope that my answer to that somewhat loaded question will be “no.” You could then depart this session quickly with a double satisfaction: having news – that the president of one of the leading (and few!) national humanities organizations has announced her own triviality -- and of gaining the time to take in another, presumably more encouraging, session.

I hope it doesn't disappoint you that my answer is “Yes, the humanities do indeed prepare students for deeper engagement with the central issues of living in a complex and interdependent world.” They also prepare students – and we are at a profound level all students – for the central issues of living and, for that matter, dying as solitary humans in a social world. Those issues come down to the problem of finding meaning in our own experiences that connect us to our fellow humans and to the past. AAC&U's report *Greater Expectations* states clearly that “A liberal education is a practical education because it develops just those capacities needed by every thinking adult: analytical skills, effective communication, practical intelligence, ethical judgment, and social responsibility.”<sup>1</sup> This is a concise statement of the bill of fare offered by the humanities. The question thus arises: why is it that the contemporary role of the humanities is still held open to question? I think part of the answer to that question lies in the meanings packed into the word “practical.” My dictionary has several definitions of the word. One, “matter-of-fact, prosaic,” does not fit the humanities. That meaning, that attribute, is often elided with another: “adapted or designed for actual use: useful.” The knowledge we gain from study and research in the humanities, and that we can bring to our students is not “prosaic,” but it is in the highest sense “useful.” Our knowledge may be hard-won, esoteric, and theoretical, but I am someone who continues to believe that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. If you wonder when you last found the humanities useful, let me ask you

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<sup>1</sup> p.26

when you last were referred to that quintessential product of humanistic research, the dictionary. About 90 seconds ago, I reckon.

But, like any card-carrying humanist, let me not just answer this question of the utility of the humanities but also contextualize and historicize it. There have been laments about the fit of the academic humanities with contemporary needs for as long as there have been an academic humanities. In surveying the history of humanistic inquiry and practice between 1890 and 1920, Laurence Veysey remarked on how the humanities had no precise definition during that period. “Theirs is the story,” he writes, “not so much of the creation of professions from scratch, as of the transition from an older, long existing professional outlook and mentality to newer, more specialized versions of it.” But the coalescence of older traditions into the modern humanities did not automatically bring with it the means of self-confident self-promotion. One prominent scholar in the 1920s confessed to a foundation officer that “the humanities had their innings for centuries while the sciences [are] just coming into theirs.” In writing to another foundation officer, James Breasted, a celebrated archaeologist, conceded that “the traditional enterprises of the humanist, and especially of the classicist, have been. . .largely limited to small and even insignificant tasks, like Julius Caesar's use of the ablative.”

Still, the academic humanities found their footing in an era of exuberant fascination with the promise of science. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century became the bloodiest in human history, Wendell Wilkie, who had been the Republican candidate for president in 1940, wrote in the *American Scholar* in 1943 that “so important are the liberal arts for our future civilization that I feel that education in them should be as much a part of our war planning as the more obviously needed technical training.” Yet he cautioned that “[i]n pleading for the humanities I am not pleading any gospel of high-browism.” Indeed, it was the malign influence of the German university that he believed “encouraged the sacrifice of methods that make for wide intelligence to those which are concerned only with specialized knowledge. . .which has made it so easy for a crowd of governmental gangsters like Hitler's outfit to commandeer a whole population.”

There are other versions of the narratives of the declension and irrelevance of the humanities and the liberal arts, of which they constitute the core, which I am sure all the humanists among you have your own weary recollection of. A related narrative finds the humanities worse than impractical: they are seen as subversive and disruptive. We saw this in the culture wars. But it is precisely those habits of the humanities that often perplex those outside, the inherently critical, analytical and self-reflective faculties we've honed so well, that both define us and renew us.

This function has been very well described by Richard Franke, the Chairman emeritus of the John Nuveen Co. and a staunch supporter and impresario of the “public humanities.”

One of the most important responsibilities of the humanities is to safeguard the public sphere from domination by any single force or ideology. Endowed with a faculty for representation, the humanities have a special responsibility in representing both the traditional and the

unexamined or forgotten perspectives, sometimes raising uncomfortable questions. . . One of their main roles in public life is to remind us of what is at stake in our policies and attitudes and to insure that our public sphere is really public.<sup>2</sup>

From a slightly different perspective, in answer to a question posed by the journal PMLA, “Why Major in Literature—What Do We Tell Our Students” (117.3, May 2002), Christina Crosby similarly argues that “the value of studying literature is precisely that it poses value as a question, not an answer.” (p. 403) She goes on to remind us that “Humanists have for the last several decades asked searching questions about what creativity means, have questioned the very category of the human [about which more later], and have acknowledged that ‘[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’ (in Walter Benjamin’s famous thesis). As Mary Poovey has recently observed, they have done so using methods that are more interrogative than accumulative, more interpretive than quantitative, and more open-ended than progressive. [Poovey] goes on to observe that the function of the humanities should be ‘to preserve, nurture, analyze, interrogate, and interpret the human’ as enacted in ‘the goods of living culture.’” (p. 403)

I’m here to tell you that even if, indeed because, the Humanities are grounded in the past, their best days are ahead. I say this so confidently because the dynamic forces that seem, at this early point, to be defining the 21<sup>st</sup> century require humanistic learning for their management and development. The forces I have in mind are information technology, globalization, and the ill-defined but undeniable fact of accelerating social, cultural, and political change. I want to discuss briefly each of these and suggest examples of how humanistic learning engages them. I believe that the directions of today’s scholarship hold great promise, but we also cannot lose sight of challenges, some manageable, others more daunting. These challenges are more institutional than intellectual, but I would be remiss if I did not share my concerns with you. I would then be interested in hearing from you about how you see the project of humanistic learning and liberal education faring on your campuses.

## **Opportunities**

*Information technology.* It is easy, and not entirely incorrect, to think of the Humanities as among the last knowledge domains to cross the digital divide and integrate new information technologies into their work. Indeed, not all of our colleagues have made that passage, and organizations like ACLS still have much work to do to encourage the fullest exploration of how digitization can enhance our work, both our scholarship and the ways in which we communicate it. But today I want to emphasize that relationship in the reverse, that is, how these new technologies create a demand for the knowledge and skills that are the distinctive contributions of the humanities.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Franke, “Democratic Vistas for the Humanities,” Futures # 1: Position Papers from Imagining America, 2000.

What do I mean by this claim? The answer is a mouse-click away: the internet and the web “work” through texts and images, two phenomena that are the stock-in-trade of the humanities.

Jerry McGann, Professor of English at the University of Virginia and one of the pioneers in applying digital technologies to humanities research (for which he was presented with the first Richard W. Lyman Award for Innovative Technology in the Humanities two years ago) makes a bold forecast: “In the next 50 years,” he writes, “the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be re-edited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination. This system, which is already under development, is transnational and transcultural.” If you credit McGann’s prediction, you must then ask the same questions he does: “Who will be carrying out this work? Who will do it? Who should do it?” Individuals schooled in the humanities, we can declare, will and must help meet what will be an ever accelerating demand for serious content in our digital domain.

But even as we develop and deepen the digital environment, we must strive to understand how we work in it and how it changes us. This, too, is a task fitted for the humanities, and many scholars are taking it up. My former UCLA colleague, N. Katherine Hayles, author of the influential book *How We Became Posthuman*, is one of the most prominent of those who have sought to bring the tools of literary and cultural analysis to this new realm. Kate revels in what she describes as “The gritty complexity that comes from engaging what one thinks something ought to mean with what it signifies to actual people enmeshed in particular circumstances.”<sup>3</sup> (That is a good description of much of the work of humanistic analysis in general.)

Kate Hayles is interested in “the development of distributed cognitive environments in which humans and computers interact in hundreds of ways daily, often unobtrusively. “The effect of moving in these distributed cognitive environments,” she writes, “is often to enhance human functioning, as the ordinary examples above illustrate. Of course, there is also a downside. As cognition becomes distributed, humans no longer control all the parameters, and in some situations, they don’t control the crucial ones, for example in automated weapon systems. Should we therefore hit the panic button and start building big bonfires into which we will toss all the computers?” she asks. No, she suggests that we “think about distributed cognition in historical terms, as something that began happening as soon as the earliest humans began developing technology. External memory storage, for example, isn’t limited to computers. It happens as early as humans drawing animals and figures on cave walls to convey information about hunting and ritual activities. Putting contemporary developments in these kinds of contexts will help us, in my view, get away from scare scenarios and begin to think in more sophisticated ways about how human-computer interactions can be fruitful and richly articulated.”<sup>4</sup>

Hayles’ work on “Strategies for understanding how words interact with their physical instantiations” is exactly what we need now, as “[i]n electronic environments words can swoop and fly, dance and morph, fade and intensify, change from black to

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.altx.com/ebr/hayles.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/borghayl.html>

red. How do these behaviors affect meaning, and how does verbal signification affect our understanding of these behaviors?"<sup>5</sup>

*Globalization.* A second great force shaping our world today is the complex of phenomena encompassed by the rubric of "globalization." As Giles Gunn has observed (in "Globalizing Literary Studies," PMLA, 116.1, January 2001), "Globalization is fraught with so many complications and discontents that one almost wishes to substitute another term. As now used, *globalization* conjures up in many minds a spectacle of instantaneous electronic financial transfers, the depredations of free-market capitalism, the homogenization of culture, and the expansion of Western, by which is usually meant American, political hegemony . . . [G]lobalization generally brings with it, as many of its critics . . . have noted, the erasure of local differences and the integration of more and more of the world's people, as well as of entire sovereign states, into a geopolitical system that inevitably erodes their ability to shape their own destinies." (p. 17) From a less alarmist perspective, it has become a commonplace to suggest that "the world has gotten smaller" because we find bottled water from Fiji on our supermarket shelves, or when we learn that the friendly, articulate voice at the other end of our 1-800 call for computer technical assistance is in Bangalore (or, in my recent experience, that the not-so-helpful AT&T billing office person is somewhere in Ireland). That people and products from formerly exotic or even unknown locations are found within the compass of our everyday experience may seem to suggest a unifying simplification of human variety. But, of course, the world has become larger and more complex: our everyday world is now the whole world, not just a fraction (local community, nation, region) of it. Globalization does not extinguish cultural particularities, and what Robert Eric Livingston has termed "globobabble" has not succeeded in homogenizing the rich diversity of human languages that is part of our legacy after Babel. ("Glocal Knowledges: Agency and Place in Literary Studies," PMLA, 116.1, p. 146) Nor, I hope, will it ever do so.

The humanist's insistence on local knowledge should play an essential role in clarifying the vision of the monoptic globalizing lens. If, as it appears, the university of the twenty-first century has declared itself an international institution, then it ought to start by knowing something about the world. Since the tragedies of September 11<sup>th</sup> we've frequently heard the phrase "now more than ever" used to advocate the need for sustained study of languages and cultures other than our own. But the imperative has always been there. Mary Louise Pratt, the president of the Modern Language Association, recently opened with Yale sociologist Nancy Rutherford's point that "Higher education is an aquifer, not a spigot" in a recent newsletter column to the MLA membership. Rutherford argues that universities "cannot be built in response to immediate needs, as the spigot someone can turn on for the expertise they need at the moment. Universities should be conceived as a deep reserve, built up slowly and sustained over the long term, on the assumption that though specific needs will arise, they cannot be anticipated." Pratt goes on to observe that "It's no accident that a discussion of international education occasioned this reflection. Deep knowledge of particular parts of the world cannot be produced overnight. It has to be built up over years, supported through real relationships with people and institutions abroad, passed along, invested in, and valued independent of the contingencies, fears, and passions of a moment." (*MLA Newsletter*, Winter 2003, p. 3)

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<sup>5</sup> [http://frontwheeldrive.com/n\\_katherine\\_hayles.html](http://frontwheeldrive.com/n_katherine_hayles.html)

As we move to internationalize our curricula, let us also not forget to contextualize the questions we ask. Whose theory frames our analysis? In what ways does it risk eliding the nuances of the local? How do the questions we pose of other cultures tally with those they ask of themselves, and of us? Without a profound understanding of the particulars of context and culture, we can hardly hope to produce a responsibly internationalized curriculum.

Suzanne Rudolph of the University of Chicago put the case quite well to an ACLS Annual Meeting a few years ago. She said:

One justification then for the study of particular non-Western civilizations is the hope of countering two-dimensional and stereotypical views of other civilizations by pursuing serious and particularizing knowledge. Politicians and policy intellectuals need to recognize that thin understandings of other cultures make bad policy, bad trade, bad neighbors, and handicap Americans in their interaction with the world.

Let me suggest another justification. The study of another civilization is not a one way street: We study Them. It is a two way process: we also study ourselves. Exploring another civilization makes evident the historically constructed nature of our self-understanding even as we confront the constructed nature of our understanding of non-Western others. It provides an opportunity to make students aware that the eyes through which Europeans gaze at non-Europe are loaded in particular ways. They can learn to be reflexive about themselves and their civilization.

One of the most important trends in humanities scholarship is the integration of the study of “foreign areas” into the basic intellectual frameworks of our research and teaching. Whereas area studies were once an exclave of academia – rigorous study of non-western cultures separated from the main body of the humanities by esoteric languages and distinctive research cultures – this stream of scholarship now cascades into and infuses our core curricula, disciplinary journals, and libraries. In a brief talk like this, it is hard to convey the scope, nuance and venturesomeness of this scholarship, which includes critical examinations not just of other cultures but of present and past instances of “globalized” cultural interaction and syncretism. But to give you just a sampling of this interest, let me recite the titles of some research projects recently supported in the ACLS Fellowship Program:

Alice Bullard, Georgia Institute of Technology

“Mending a Broken Mirror: from colonial to transcultural psychiatry in French North and West Africa.”

Yunxiang Yan, University of California, Los Angeles

“McDonalds in Beijing: Americana, cultural globalization, and the socialist state.”

Mark Sanders, Brandeis University

“Literature and law in testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa.”

## **Change – Meaning**

Digitization and globalization are just two dimensions of the waves of the social, cultural, and economic changes which we all are riding. Change can often be disorienting. It is in this connection that the distinctive relationship of humanities scholarship and teaching with the past comes into play by helping to provide meaning to the movement from past to future that is the definition of change.

The humanities take with utmost seriousness their scholarly responsibility to the documents and artifacts of the past. While this is not their only rationale, I think it is true that if not for humanistic disciplines, then the past—especially the distant past—would get short shrift in the academy. If some scholars in the nineteenth century already thought that nothing earlier than the fifth century was much worth reading, that line has slipped forward precipitously with every decade since then. But, as many have noted, we forget the past at our peril, even as—or especially as—we prepare ourselves for the future.

Today's most conspicuous and compelling instance of bewildering change may be China, where economic growth is altering the cultural, political, and demographic shape of the world's largest country and what is arguably the world's oldest continuing civilization. Chinese scholars and institutions are scrambling to develop frameworks for understanding that continuity in relation to the sweeping change around them. One striking example of this search is the decision by the Communist leadership to erect a statue of the sage Confucius on the grounds of the High Party Training School, something unthinkable three decades ago. The Chinese are conducting what scientists would call a "natural experiment" in alloying change and continuity, and the outcome of that experiment should interest us all. Another example of how the work of the humanities is of immediate relevance in this regard comes from Don Waters of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The breakneck pace of Chinese development has brought about a quantum leap in archaeological discovery. New China is digging itself up and finding a lot of old China. New technologies- web-based visualizations of artifacts and the scene of their discovery - allow for rapid international transmission, analysis and codification of these discoveries. Our understanding of ancient China is enhanced, along with the Chinese understanding of their place, quite literally, in history.

## **Challenges**

These are just a few examples of the close fit between the project of the humanities and the circumstances of the contemporary world. I don't need to remind you of the many others I haven't discussed, such as questions of values and ethics that especially link humanistic learning with other disciplines. What, then, are the challenges to the fullest educational expressions of that alignment? As an only recently emancipated dean, I could focus on the structural and institutional impediments within our colleges and universities. Instead, I would like to touch briefly on two issues: first, the pressure on students to conceive of education as vocational training, and second, the economic and institutional pressures that are eroding the vocation of the teacher-scholar. The first challenge is, I will argue, a problem of perception. I wish the second were only that.

To take up the first issue, which may be what the description of this session called “the decline in the humanities market.” I’m not sure exactly what that phrase means to imply, but I suspect it concerns the willingness of students to major in disciplines included in the portfolio of a dean of humanities. If so, I’m not at all certain that “decline” is the best description. While the data are soft, it does not seem that there has been a reduction in the absolute number of students majoring in literature or history, although the relative disparities are undeniable. What is certain is that the growth of our educational enterprise – the move from mass to universal access to higher education – has eroded the relative position of the humanities. As Luke Menand pointed out in an ACLS Occasional Paper a few years ago, more students earned undergraduate degrees in protective services than in all foreign languages combined (ACLS *Occasional Paper* No. 49, *The Marketplace of Ideas* by Louis Menand, 2001).

It does not surprise me that hard-pressed, loan-burdened students would conclude that employability should be one the chief benefits of education. What does surprise and trouble me, is that we in the humanities have not made a stronger case for the sort of liberal arts education of which the humanities is such an essential component. Indeed, we have sometimes been willing to concede the point. Howard Mumford Jones, one of the humanities’ most incisive advocates in the 1950s and 1960s, wrote that the humanities were not designed to make students a better living, but equipped them to live better.

I’m not ready to concede that point. As the report *Greater Expectations* notes, we are moving from an industrial economy to a knowledge based economy. As we do, the premium on the analytical, expressive and conceptual skills of liberally educated individuals will only increase. Stephen Fix of Williams College, speaking at a conference on the future of the liberal arts college co-sponsored by the ACLS, tells of a conversation with the head of human resources for a major aerospace company, who confessed to a preference for hiring philosophy majors. Why? These graduates, he observed, may not, initially, know much about aeronautics or business, but they understand complexity.

Corporate leaders make the similar points directly and publicly. Some of you may know the commencement address, “The Process of Distillation and Getting to the Essence of Things,” delivered at Stanford in 2001 by Carly Fiorina, President and CEO of Hewlett-Packard. She had majored in medieval history there and told the graduating class that:

The most valuable class I took at Stanford was *not* Econ 51. It was a graduate seminar called, believe it or not, Christian, Islamic and Jewish Political Philosophies of the Middle Ages.

Each week, we had to read one of the great works of medieval philosophy. . . There were huge texts – it seemed like we were reading 1,000 pages every week. And by the end of the week, we had to distill their philosophical discourse into two pages.”

The philosophies and ideologies certainly left an impression on me. But the rigor of the distillation process, the exercise of refinement, that’s

where the real learning happened. It was an incredible, heady skill to master. Through the years, I've used it again and again – the mental exercise of synthesis and distillation and getting to the very heart of things.”<sup>6</sup>

Some of you may also recall an article in the NY Times a couple of years ago about a young woman named Bethany McLean.<sup>7</sup> She was the writer for Fortune magazine who first highlighted hard questions about the balance sheet of Enron. “How exactly does Enron make its money?” she wrote. The information was not in the company’s financial reports. Enron executives called her unethical for asking pointed questions without doing enough research. They tried to convince her bosses she was wrongheaded. They alleged that she’d relied on a source who stood to profit if the share price of Enron fell. Well, you know the rest of the story, but what interested me in the article was Bethany McLean’s explanation of why she’d been able to do what she did. As a major in math with work experience at Goldman Sachs, she’d learned how to read Enron’s spread sheets. But as a double major in literature, she’d learned something perhaps even more important, to question why those spread sheets looked the way they did. Coming from the humanities, she said, “you want to know why something is the way it is.” In accounting, “there is no reason why. There is no fundamental truth underlying it. It’s just based on rules, and these rules create an incentive to get around rules.” Coming from the humanities, of course, she also knew how to tell the story she’d uncovered with great effectiveness.

## **Second challenge**

So, I hope I have begun to persuade you that “the humanities *somehow* prepare students for deeper engagement with the central issues of living and working in a complex and interdependent world?” I do think that we need to do a better job convincing our students, parents, and the public that the humanities, especially the humanities in the context of the liberal arts, are a necessary element of education for 21<sup>st</sup> century life. We need to do a better job, but it can be done. What is a greater challenge, and on this point I want to conclude, is the changing political economy of higher education, in particular, what may be a transformation in the structure of the academic teaching force. This is what Martin Finkelstein called in a recent issue of *Liberal Education*, “The Morphing of the American Academic Profession.”<sup>8</sup>

Anyone concerned about the future of higher education in this country should attend to the important work of Martin Finkelstein and his colleague, Jack Schuster. Their research analyzes and documents the significant restructuring of the American professoriate now afoot. In the time remaining, I cannot do justice to the breadth and care of their work, but let me emphasize three important findings:

First, that full-time tenure track faculty members are a rapidly shrinking faction of the teaching force. This category of faculty—teacher-scholars—were only

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.hp.com/hpinfo/execteam/fiorina/stanford\\_01.html](http://www.hp.com/hpinfo/execteam/fiorina/stanford_01.html)

<sup>7</sup> Felicity Barringer, “Enron’s Many Strands: Early Scrutiny; 10 Months Ago, Questions on Enron Came and Went With Little Notice,” *New York Times*, 28 January 2002, late ed.: A11.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Finkelstein, “The Morphing of the American Academic Profession,” *Liberal Education* (Fall 2003): 6-15.

¼ of the new hires in 2001. The fastest growing segment of the professoriate is not the part-time adjunct faculty with whose often difficult situations we have become alarmingly familiar. We see the greatest growth, rather, in *full-time* “contingent” i.e. non-tenure track faculty.

These facts are likely not news to many of you; you see it on your campuses and in your departments. There is no conspiracy here. This change is both a persuasive and radically de-centered phenomenon. Refusing to point fingers, Schuster and Finkelstein set this change in the context of global “seismic economic realignments” that have brought with them reconceptualizations of organizations and of work.<sup>9</sup>

And that is their second important point: that the apparent transformation of the American professoriate is not simply an episodic reallocation of resources but that it contains within it a redefinition of what academic work is. The teacher-scholar who has a long-term commitment to both the development and transmission of knowledge in all its fullness is overlaid by the “just-in-time” teacher hired for discrete and perhaps transient aims. We see again the difference between the aquifer and the spigot. The research, knowledge and teaching resources I described earlier come from deep within the academic aquifer. We should not fail to ask to what extent we ourselves are responsible for changing that paradigm.

The third point I want to emphasize from Schuster and Finkelstein’s research is that while this transformation is pervasive, it is not happening evenly: there are, to quote Finkelstein’s article in *Liberal Education*, “*differential patters of restructuring...discernible by academic field*. Several fields in the humanities—most notably, English and foreign languages—and others, including mathematics and business, are on their way to becoming collections of transients, even at the research universities.”<sup>10</sup>

So, in conclusion, I am sure you can see the promise and peril this moment holds for the academic Humanities and for the liberal arts. The humanities do not need be apologetic about their “practical” value to students, to the academy, to the public. Deep knowledge of the past and of the particular, self-reflection, a willingness to question what seems obvious or without question, and to reaffirm what seems of enduring value—therein lie the contributions of the humanities. We cannot afford to take the risk of losing the insights into ourselves, our pasts and our futures that they teach us. We do need to find the means of assuring that we can continue to transmit that value to students. But in making the case for our practical value we need to be equally clear that long-term value differs importantly from the contingent instrumentality that is too often—and increasingly—an expedient of educational planning and policy-making. Higher education is, after all, an aquifer, not a spigot. Thank you.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid p.10

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 13