The Value of our Contributions

The question on my mind today is this: after I complete the PhD in English, where will my contributions be most deeply felt and valued? This question emerges from the conviction that there is a critical need at all levels of our educational system, and, in fact, across all sectors of the economy, for workers with advanced training in the humanities. Far from the notion that we are in oversupply, I believe the opposite: there is more work to be done in serious humanistic inquiry and structural reform than my generation of doctoral students will be able to complete in our lifetimes. Furthermore, I am confident that we can undertake this work on terms that are favorable to us, by which I mean quite frankly that we will be compensated rather than exploited for our labor. I am of course describing a world in which humanities PhDs understand themselves to be, and are received as, highly valuable professionals within as well as far beyond the tenure track. My approach to my own career is predicated upon a refusal to accept a single outcome as the limit of my value.

I have been asked here today to articulate the value of the humanities to the larger world. My response to this is in three brief parts. First, the value of the humanities to the world beyond the university is determined by the sort of training its practitioners receive – so I will discuss the ways in which we must reimagine the PhD to include the public good as a key concern of graduate education. Secondly, our value to the larger world is defined in part by the depth of our connection to that world – so I will insist that we reconceptualize who our colleagues are. Finally, our value to the larger world can be measured in some sense by how effective we are in shaping that world – so I will argue that we must prepare for and seek out positions of leadership. Sidonie Smith recently wrote in her *Manifesto for the Humanities* that we must be at
the table wherever policies are made, “or call attention, insistently, unabashedly, to the absence of humanists at the table,” and she is right.

In order to strengthen the presence of the humanities in the larger world, and to make our value apparent in spaces beyond the academy, we must reform doctoral education in the disciplines to include a serious concern for the public good. This can take many forms. At the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, we have launched a new program that extends our historical commitment to public scholarship. The program, for which I serve as Assistant Director, is called *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics*. It has three components. First, it offers summer fellowship support for doctoral students to pursue projects in public scholarship. Many faculty, staff, and graduate students at the University of Washington identify as publicly-engaged scholars, and we have a thriving community of practice in this area through the Certificate in Public Scholarship, a portfolio and practicum based curriculum that has been transformative for graduate education on our campus. But we wanted to do more to foster the methods and values of public scholarship at the earliest stages of doctoral study—the graduate seminar—so the second part of the grant supports UW faculty members in developing new courses in the public humanities. Faculty who design and teach these new seminars will model for their students public engagement as part of the scholarly vocation. Taken together, these two aspects of the program emphasize public scholarship as a foundation of advanced training in the humanities.

The third part of the program is focused on graduate student professional development. It reaches new publics through a cross-institutional collaboration with two-year colleges in the Seattle District. As we note on the [program site](http://example.com), “two-year colleges in the United States serve
close to half of all undergraduates, including fifty percent of undergraduates of color.” They are extremely important sites of humanistic inquiry and pedagogy. Yet, graduate students are rarely encouraged to gain deep experiences there. To counter this, we have placed doctoral students from six UW humanities departments across three extraordinarily diverse community college campuses in our city, pairing them with faculty mentors in their disciplines.

Through our partnership with the Seattle District colleges, the faculty and leadership of these institutions have become our colleagues not only in name but also in practice. We should extend this habit – what I think of as the act of claiming our colleagues, an act that radically alters our professional networks and capabilities – beyond higher education to practitioners of the humanities in business, non-profit, and government. Among these various professionals, you will find many people who hold the PhD or other types of advanced training in our fields. These people, wherever they are currently working, are the “talent” that we have developed within our institutions, programs, and professional organizations. Departments can track their graduates and publicly honor the work that they are doing within and beyond the academy, an effort that would begin to undo the implicit prohibition in many graduate programs on even considering work that does not align with the one outcome of the tenure track. And if programs will not take this step, graduate students must act for themselves. We should research the work that is being done in other sectors that resonates with what we value, and expand our networks to include anyone who is doing the kind of work in which we hope to invest our lives.

Deepening our connection to the world is about changing the narrative of success and failure within the culture of graduate programs. But it is also a pragmatic approach to the reality that the academic humanities do not currently have the capacity to retain the talent we develop. This is why I insist that graduate students not go on “the market,” as we say, by which of course
we mean the academic job market, but rather the job markets—plural. And we should determine
to accept positions that offer to us the most dignity and potential for growth. These two factors
will greatly shape the contributions we ultimately make. And some of the places from which we
can be best positioned to make significant contributions are without question located in the
business, non-profit, and government sectors. We can become what Paula Krebs has called
“humanities professionals.” We should resolve to become a generation of scholars devoted to
what historian Abby Smith Rumsey calls “translational humanities,” which she defines as “the
application of humanities expertise in domains beyond higher education and cultural heritage
institutions.” And we should, in my view, undertake that important work from positions of
influence.

My final point today is to argue that the study of the humanities is conducive to the
development of the most important qualities of strong leaders. We do not often regard our
doctoral programs as sites of leadership development, but we should. This is an area in which we
have much to offer and much to gain—as leaders, we can make significant contributions to any
organization. And our presence in such positions deepens the influence of the humanities overall,
but only if we claim our graduates wherever they go. The private sector, for example, is quite
interested in effective leadership. In researching the topic, I turned to McKinsey, a consulting
company. They report that “over 90 percent of CEOs are planning to increase investment in
leadership development because they see it as the single most important human-capital issue
their organizations face.” The authors of the report go on to say that there are four qualities that
are associated with strong leadership. Tell me if any of them sound familiar:

1. Solving problems effectively: the McKinsey report tells us that leaders are required to
make decisions, and that “the process that precedes decision making is problem solving,
when information is gathered, analyzed, and considered.” The authors note that “this is deceptively difficult to get right.” Our research practices make us uniquely qualified for the complexity and depth of thought that is required for the solving of problems.

2. Seeking different perspectives: Strong leaders take multiple perspectives into account before they make decisions. The valuing of many perspectives is something that we have been fighting for in the humanities for some time. We can clearly continue this work in settings beyond the academy.

3. Supporting others: “Leaders who are supportive understand and sense how other people feel. By showing authenticity and a sincere interest in those around them, they build trust and inspire and help colleagues to overcome challenges.” Change the word “colleagues” to “students,” and you have described, to my mind, a very effective classroom.

4. Operating with a strong results orientation: We should be thinking, first and foremost, about what a results-driven humanities professional would look like. A number of examples of such people have been gathered under the banner of the new MLA initiative Connected Academics—and we need many, many more.

I hope that I have been persuasive in showing that there is work to be done. We are in the world and we are beholden to it. We are not exempt from its concerns. What is required of us at this moment in the history of our profession is to discover where our knowledge and abilities are critically needed, and go there. To do so is not a concession and it is not failure. It is a redefinition of the scholarly vocation for the 21st century that aligns with the necessary expansion of self and work that the authors of the 2008 report of the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate articulate when they insist that wherever PhDs go, “they are scholars, for the work of scholarship is not a function of setting but of purpose and commitment.”
Works Cited


