

A Student's Search for Meaning
Reflections on the Intersections
of College Chaplaincy,
Liberal Arts and the University

Edited by
Melissa Carter, James W. Fraser, Chelsea Garbell, and
Amy Wilson

Bringing Meaning to the Lives of Students: Great Teachers, Great Texts and General Education

Melinda S. Zook, Purdue University

Any “search for meaning” begins with the individual, to seek oneself and one’s place in the world. That search can be carried out without a college education, but it cannot be fully realized without the humanities, meaning simply it requires the contemplation of religions, art, history, literature, philosophy. In short, the culture of our humanity is what makes us human.²

Our goal as humanists is to educate free people: To inculcate in them curiosity and wonder; an appreciation of creativity and beauty; a respect for historical contexts and ideas; a capacity for compassion and critical self-examination. It is, in short, to live the examined life. Or as Roosevelt Montás writes, “turning students’ eyes inward,” so that they might explore their own humanity.³

Institutions of higher education have an obligation to lead the young who arrive at their doorsteps on their journey to self-

²In Willem B. Drees, *What are the Humanities For?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) he defines the humanities as “academic disciplines in which humans seek understanding of human self-understandings and self-expressions, and of the ways in which people thereby construct and experience the world they live in.” 12.

³Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 19.

realization, to grow them as responsible and centered adults and citizens. They are failing at this task. They bow to the demands of the market, administrators, and politicians, as well as anxious parents. Those of us in the Liberal Arts know the allure of our competition: the well-branded and well-funded STEM disciplines. The number of students in their degree programs have surged since the Recession of 2007; while our numbers continue to spiral down. In 2020, fewer than one in ten college graduates obtained a degree in the humanities.⁴ In fact, it often feels like our own institutions are conspiring in the demise of the humanities by creating, nearly every year, new degree programs in data analytics, computer coding, and cybersecurity – all of which have high job placement and above-average starting salaries – while simultaneously diminishing humanities programs.⁵ These are dismal times for those of us who believe in the life of the mind; and for the power and beauty of the word: the written word, the spoken word; that crystallization of ideas that comes through reading, thinking and communicating; the words, images, and art that connects us and maybe sometimes divides us, but is always shared and without which we are utterly alone.

⁴ Joshua Wright, "STEM Majors Are Accelerating in Every State: Just as Humanities Degrees Are Declining," EMSI (March 20, 2016), <https://www.economicmodeling.com/2016/03/20/stem-programs-humanities-in-each-state/>; Jill Barshay, "The number of college graduates in the humanities drops for the eighth consecutive year," *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, November 22, 2021; <https://www.amacad.org/news/college-graduates-humanities-drops-eighth-consecutive-year>

⁵ Jim Fong, "What the Numbers Tell Us: Re-Engineering the Liberal Arts Degree – A Baseline for the New Economy," *Unbound: Reinventing Higher Education* (2019), <https://unbound.upcea.edu/research-and-policy/re-engineering-the-liberal-arts-degree-a-baseline-for-the-new-economy/>.

And, yet despite the sense of loss and even disarray, especially over the last two plague years, I am convinced we have reason to hope. We have hope because of scholars like Roosevelt Montás and his celebration of the power of core texts and Andrew Delbanco in his lucid analysis of the state of higher education and its vital role in democratic citizenship.⁶ We have hope because of core texts programs, from the more traditional Core Curriculum at Columbia, and Yale's Directed Studies, to Purdue's innovative Cornerstone program, as well as all the other core texts programs across the country. We have hope because of conversations like that between humanities faculty and college chaplains at New York University seek answers. But, above all, my hope resides in our young people. For if my experiences teaching what we at Purdue call "transformative texts," have proved anything to me, it is that our students are eminently open and searching, teachable and transformable and this is especially true at the outset of their college careers.

This brings me to general education. The humanities are for everyone; we, all of us, search for meaning. Montás makes this point with far more eloquence than I ever could. Whereas he is concerned with bringing core texts to marginalized communities, I want to stress the need to reach across our campuses and provide all our students, particularly those in STEM and management degree programs, a more robust, coherent, and meaningful general education experience. The Liberal Arts are not merely for those students in our dwindling

⁶Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Andrew Delbanco, *College: What it was, is, and should be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

majors. They provide us with a doorway to the rest of the campus. General education requirements are the doorway through which we can teach all undergraduates and they, in turn, can learn about us, and about everything we believe in: the power of stories, ideas, words; the beauty of music, art, film and theatre. Those things that make us human.

Now, I know that sometimes we all complain about students: obsessed with their phones, easily distracted, focused on credentialism and vocational instruction. But, if so, we are in part to blame. Because given the opportunity, as we have found at Purdue, students are completely capable of putting technology aside, engaging with ideas, with texts, and each other, in an open, inclusive environment with a faculty member. In fact, they have been more than willing to put aside "childish things."

The truth is young people want their college education to transform them. They want something we humanists can provide in abundance: inspiration, beauty, transcendence. Although they may not be able to articulate it, our students want to be moved, changed, have their eyes opened, be made anew. That transformation is what college is for and that is far more important to their development as responsible adults than teaching them skills that may soon be outdated. If we can teach them to be flexible learners; to be able to identify dubious claims; to understand nuance and subtly, and to be able to communicate their ideas with precision, we will have fulfilled a great service to their futures as employees and citizens.

Our institutions already have the resources in place to do this: their Liberal Arts faculty, both humanists and social scientists. We, from the philosopher to the historian to the sociologist, remember what turned us on, what fired our imagination when we were undergraduates. We remember the professors who brought Plato or Nietzsche or Thoreau alive for us and taught us so much more than just the text. If you had never experienced an inspiring teacher, you would not be an educator now. Education is not simply words on page or a screen, nor gained simply from pixels, books, or bytes. Education is personal and nothing can replace “the living inspiration of the living teacher.”⁷ This should be our goal in general education courses – great teachers, teaching great texts, embodying the living inspiration.

I direct the Cornerstone program at Purdue and teach the foundational sequence, Transformative Texts. I have learned a lot about students over the years. We are now dealing with Generation Z. On the whole, I find that they yearn for direction, connection, and for meaning, although they seem puzzled at where to look. They have been scarred by two years of pandemic and online instruction, but far worse by social media. They need mentors; they need great teachers; they need living, breathing inspirations, and this is where we the faculty come in. The undergraduate capacity for learning is ripe when they first set foot on campus. They have an eagerness and an

⁷ Julius Seelye quoted by Jonathan Zimmerman, *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 30. Seelye was the president of Amherst College, in 1887 he wrote, “Education is a wholly personal work. It is not gained by books, or by instruction alone, nor by anything in place of the living inspiration of the living teacher.”

openness that is our window for opportunity. We can throw it wide open, or we can slam it shut.

Consider how easy it is to smother their enthusiasm; the eighteen or nineteen-year-old comes to college wide-eyed and ready to absorb different ideas and traditions. But even before they have a chance to enjoy the sublimity and beauty of Rumi or Shakespeare, even before they have a chance to grasp the ideas and wisdom of Plato or Locke or Gandhi; we point out their flawed thinking and blindness, according to twentieth-first century standards.⁸ We reduce these texts and their author's humanity and limit their words to mere ideology. We breed in our students' cynicism, contempt, and distrust for every authority and tradition. And once we have done that, mission accomplished, we have killed their interest. They won't be taking any more of our classes. Off they go to code and build bots.

This is the future without the humanities: a world of technicians and technocrats who believe that only science, technology, and the market can solve our problems. And why, because when we had the opportunity, during their first year, we did not instill them with a relish, an appreciation, and a recognition of the complexity and poignancy of the human condition or a thirst to learn more about history or philosophy or world literature. We did not inspire them to take more

⁸I heard a graduate student do exactly this recently, giving a talk on Mary Astell, the brilliant seventeenth-century English feminist. Before the students had any idea how Astell had contributed to the history of women's liberation, the instructor demolished her by describing her as "privileged," code for biased, unreliable; in short, 'nothing to see here.' This would have been startling news to Astell herself; an outsider without family connection and a woman trying to compete in the male world of the publishing.

advanced Liberal Arts courses so that we could continue to challenge them with the wisdom of the past and the complexity of the present. If you want the young to reflect critically upon their own convictions and arguments, ideas, and identities, then you have to get them in the door, provide them with a foundation and an appreciation of the human experience. Don't expect them to critique John Locke or Adam Smith before they *understand* John Locke or Adam Smith.

The Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program at Purdue is now in its fifth academic year. Its purpose is to provide our undergraduates, the vast majority of whom are in the STEM disciplines, with a robust Liberal Arts experience.⁹ First-year students take a two-semester general education sequence, called Transformative Texts I and II. These are intensive courses: part core texts; part communication skills. We teach them Aristotle and Hobbes and Frederick Douglas and Langston Hughes. We teach them writing and presentation skills. We teach them teamwork and research basics. We use full-time faculty, scholars, and teachers, from every Liberal Arts department in the College. We provide our first-year students with a small classroom experience in a large public university setting; mentoring, directing, consoling, and assisting students who have problems or simply need an adult to talk to.

This program has been successful. It is making a difference on our campus culture and in the lives of our students. We taught

⁹ See the Cornerstone Program homepage at <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/cornerstone/index.html>. For a detailed discussion of the program including its origins, see Melinda S. Zook, "Giant Leaps for the Liberal Arts at Purdue," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 51:6, (2019): 45-51.

4,200 students in our first-year sequence in 2020-21 and are on track to teach around 8000 this year, 2021-22. Our faculty range from the keenly innovative, newly minted PhD in comparative literature to the full professor in political science with extensive teaching experience and everything in between. We help teach each other in workshops. We work with other units across the university: from our Data Mine and Galleries to our Archives and Special Collections and Film and Video Studies.

In the Transformative Texts sequence, our texts are pretexts, leading us to discussions about life, love, loss, hope, despair, suffering, friendship, fairness, and forgiveness. The human condition. The full array of what we are as humans. And in addition to our small Socratic classroom settings, we take our students out of the classroom, to the theatre, art galleries, and films festivals, and concert halls and cultural centers. To know the arts, you must experience them. Transformative texts, along with good teaching, can change lives.

Young people have a great capacity for wonder and for love. They yearn for transformation; new vistas that can both open their eyes to the world and allow them to see themselves anew; to be shown something beyond mere technique. Our window of opportunity comes when they first step on campus. We can transform our general education requirements into something that inspires, enriches, and nourishes our students, rather than simply something they are trying to get beyond. At Purdue, we are throwing open the window as wide as it will go; and if a Research 1, STEM-oriented university can do this – so might we all. Together, let us make learning a joy that enlightens and inspires and provides meaning.