

MANIFESTO AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE Humanities at Vanderbilt

Report from the Chancellor's Humanities Committee

MAY 12, 2017



MANIFESTO FOR THE HUMANITIES AT VANDERBILT

Why we matter

It is our conviction that—locally, nationally, and globally—we urgently need the deep and wide perspective that the arts and humanities provide. An education devoted to the arts, humanistic research, cultural study, and interpretive practice reveals how crucial a role human creativity plays in all modes of inquiry, across all disciplines. The proposals outlined below aim to light creative sparks across the Vanderbilt community. Here as everywhere, current economic pressures mean that the humanities have been vulnerable because they have become subject to narrow definitions of educational “utility.” Measuring humanistic study and artistic creation according to use value occludes the significant contribution they make to a fully realized liberal arts education, a vibrant academic community, and our common social world. Studies in the humanities are uniquely qualified to teach students the critical skills necessary for all kinds of interpretive, analytic, and creative work inside and outside the university. And they are uniquely effective in requiring scholars to reflect carefully on their own methods and research goals while reaching across disciplines to discover new and different questions. The arts and humanities combine a spirit of discovery with an allied devotion to a kind of cultural curatorship without which we would scarcely understand our own histories, let alone those of others. They allow us to express ourselves and to study the ways we express ourselves: in a film, a poem, a song, a sculpture, but also an Instagram post, a tweet, a video game, a lab experiment, a philosophical treatise, a sacred rite. The arts weave their way into the fabric of humanities disciplines, and in turn these disciplines illuminate the arts. Without them in conversation and mutual endeavor, we are less able to address the enormous challenges facing us in a world of many peoples and many languages; with them, we discover the power of human understanding and creation in all its forms.

Such characterizations may seem too abstract, too much a matter of ideals that do not make sense of the “real world.” But we are saying the opposite. The world presents us with many locks, many barriers to understanding, and so we need many keys. The more keys our undergraduates have to unlock the world, the better they will work and thrive in it. Most people will change careers several times in their lives. People who have developed their capacity for critical thought and creativity, who have learned languages other than their own, navigate more successfully through these changes; skills that persist, such as being able to reason and to write, sustain a lifetime of work despite the vagaries of employment. Employers of college graduates also look for more than mastery of a particular body of knowledge, which may or may not be relevant to the job

at hand. They want the people they hire to have the ability to think on their own, to understand and work with other people, to do things that machines can't do. Consistently, trade magazines and successful leaders in the nonprofit and business worlds come back to three things that the humanities and arts cultivate vigorously: the ability to think, to write, and to speak. But beyond such views of their evident utility, we must also emphasize their power to illuminate the human condition. Humanities and the arts nurture people in their capacities not simply as workers but as citizens and stewards, as community members, critics, social actors, appreciators, questioners, and observers—that is, as human beings. As Adam Gopnik wrote recently in *The New Yorker*, “we cannot merely produce goods and services as efficiently as we can, sell them to each other as cheaply as possible, and die.” In defense of literacy, reading, and life, he declared, “Doing Something Else is essential to human existence.”

What to do next

As at many of our peer institutions, humanistic work goes on all over campus, with connections out into the community. But we can do more. We call on our university leaders, our colleagues, and our students to seize the opportunity to build upon our current strengths and make the arts and humanities at Vanderbilt exceptional. To do so, we must connect the disparate parts of our community through our scholarship, creativity, and action. We therefore have compiled a strategic plan for taking the humanities to the next level. It describes the necessary steps to realize our vision. This manifesto lays out major initiatives: a Building, an Institute for Humanistic Inquiry, a Course, and a detailed plan for strengthening the already lively tradition of the arts and humanities on our campus. It suggests one-, two-, and five-year horizons for action within these three initiatives. The overall plan encompasses big ideas, such as a building that would make an architectural and programmatic statement. Visitors to campus and indeed to Nashville would want to visit it, and it would give our university community the kinds of spaces it badly needs: performance spaces, study spaces, seminar spaces, galleries, a cinémathèque, venues for symposia and workshops, for immersion experiences, and common rooms with food and drink. We also propose founding an institute of scholars that will draw people from around the world to our campus to work alongside our faculty, post-docs, and graduate students. The plan finally includes smaller-scale but thoroughgoing initiatives such as the development of cross-disciplinary seminars on the topic “What is human?” designed for first- and second-year students and taught by pairs or trios of faculty who offer distinctly different answers to that question. The particulars follow.

1. THE BUILDING

Broad Concept

- The building should be centrally and favorably located, so that scholars from different disciplines—both within and beyond the arts and humanities—can easily meet, interact, imagine, plan, work, and create together. The space itself should be designed to encourage creative convergences among sculptors, biologists, composers, historians, engineers, poets, chemists, literary critics, painters, scholars of religion, singers, philosophers, film theorists, stage directors: a building with walls but not boundaries.
- In recognition of the public functions of the arts and humanities, the building should be a space within which our activities can enrich and at the same time invite participation from the larger community.
- The university should seek out design bids from internationally renowned architects and invest in creating a structure that is both eye-catching and imaginative in its use of space for multiple purposes.

Specific Resources

To coordinate the spaces listed below, we would hire an executive director with strong academic, arts, and/or administrative credentials. We would expect the director to develop a staff who would interact with Vanderbilt faculty, staff, and students, as well as partners in Nashville to design a vibrant arts program:

- A large, flexible performance space, which can accommodate theater, music, and other dramatic arts, open to two publics: the entire Vanderbilt community, and the Nashville community; it could convert into ballroom space for large receptions and events
- Smaller, unadorned performance spaces (black box theaters) for more intimate and/or experimental productions
- State-of-the-art cinémathèque with a dedicated programmer to host a world-class film series, including post-screening discussions and visiting speakers, all of which would be free and open to the public
- Galleries and studio spaces, including space for a “teaching museum,” where people can look closely at objects, hold them, work with them
- A Creative Media and Maker Lab, which could perhaps also be a permanent home for the Center for Digital Humanities, now housed in Buttrick
- Thoughtfully designed seminar classrooms, which at present we sorely lack, adversely affecting our teaching and learning potential
- Symposium, colloquium, group writing, and workshop spaces
- Open-configured office suites through which clusters of faculty, whether from within or from outside Vanderbilt, might rotate; also serving as swing spaces for faculty, while other offices and classrooms on campus are renovated
- A common room devoted to faculty and graduate students that would serve as an informal space for conversation, collaboration, and reception. It would enable colleagues to gather for lunch, for coffee, and for drinks over the course of the day; it would also have up-to-date newspapers, journals, and magazines available
- Finally, the director and staff would assume responsibility for the arts in public spaces all around campus in collaboration with the Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery

Potential Community Partners for Joint Programming and Events

- Jefferson Corridor Project, led by Lorenzo Washington, helping to celebrate, revitalize, research, and archive the rich cultural, religious, and historical legacy of this pivotal Nashville neighborhood
- Fisk University
- Tennessee State University
- 89.5 WMOT Roots Radio; organizing live shows around town on a weekly basis, from “Americana”-type artists
- Darkhorse Theater
- Oz Arts Nashville
- The National Museum of African American Music (scheduled to open in 2019)
- The Nashville Public Library
- Nashville Opera, and the Noah Liff Opera Center (John Hoopes)
- Nashville Ballet
- Belcourt Theatre
- Local art galleries (private as well as the Frist) and artist collectives
- Parnassus Books
- And many more

2. THE VANDERBILT INSTITUTE FOR HUMANISTIC INQUIRY

The Space

This might be created in one of two ways:

- Convert an extant building (e.g. the Disciples of Christ building or the University Residence)
- Dedicate a floor of the humanities building

The Scholars

- External faculty fellows (c. 10)
- Internal faculty fellows (c. 10)
- Internal postdoctoral fellows (c. 10)
- Internal graduate student fellows (c. 10)
- Visiting Scholars program (faculty, postdoctoral, doctoral) affiliated with VIHI and dedicated to research in the Special Collections Library

The Models

- We would draw on the strengths of the best national models: for example, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the Stanford Humanities Center, the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, and the National Humanities Center. But we would also combine, modify, and rethink aspects of those models to suit our particular needs.

Our Priorities

- A mix of internal and external fellows, and fellows at different career stages, including recent Vanderbilt Ph.D.’s in the humanities disciplines
- Active solicitation of applications from the visual, performance, and media arts as well as scholars in the sciences seeking to develop the humanistic dimension of their work
- The requirement that each give a public presentation, installation, or performance for the entire Vanderbilt community, with dedicated financial support from the institute
- Studies, offices, writing spaces, and studios
- Office suites that afford collaborative space
- A dining hall with weekday lunches as well as a bar to facilitate fellows’ informal, unpredictable, and variable interactions

3. THE COURSE: "WHAT IS HUMAN?"

A course for students in their first or second year designed to highlight the sheer number and often-contested nature of answers to the question, "what is human?" The course would be topically focused, taught by two to three scholars with distinctly different approaches to the question.

It could be organized in two ways:

- Small seminars taught by faculty and postdoctoral fellows associated with a special postdoctoral program created for this purpose, attached to the undergraduate dean's office, The Ingram Commons, and Warren and Moore Colleges
- Through The Commons iSeminars program

4. STRENGTHENING EXISTING RESOURCES

Vanderbilt Libraries

We cannot overstate the centrality of a first-rate research library for a first-rate university. The library is to humanistic research what state-of-the-art laboratories and computing systems are for the sciences and engineering. Rankings are crude measures, but the discrepancy between Vanderbilt's overall standing and that of its university libraries is striking. *U.S. News & World Report* ranks Vanderbilt University 15th in the U.S.; the Association of Research Libraries ranks our libraries as 54th. All of the initiatives outlined here will depend on serious investment in the libraries, their permanent and special collections, their infrastructure (technical and bricks-and-mortar), and their professional staff. For humanists, the library is what immersion is all about.

Specific priorities:

1. Increase institutional investment—the current budget devotes c. 80 percent to recurring costs (e.g. databases, e-science journals), leaving meager support for responsive collection development
2. Acquire a new online catalog immediately—the current one is twenty years old and does nothing for the public face of our university
3. Establish a standing committee of faculty from all schools to advise and support the university librarian

The time has not passed to build a great research library in the arts and humanities. With our dynamic new university librarian, Valerie Hotchkiss, and a soon-to-be-hired new director of the Central Library, we are poised to make up for decades of neglect.

Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities

If the new building is approved, we need to plan for the future of the Warren Center. During construction, the center would remain much as it is, with a robust program of seminars, reading groups, and talks. Once the building is open, we propose that the center be transformed into the Robert Penn Warren Graduate Center—a place to host a range of activities specially designed to advance scholarship in the intellectual life of our graduate students.

Curricular Development

As a contribution to the immersion requirement, we would introduce the tutorial model into teaching: these are classes in the arts and humanities with no more than three students and are comparable to working with a scientist in a laboratory or participating in a music master class. They draw on the Oxbridge model, but in our case students would also design a reading list with their faculty. These courses would require students to produce essays every two weeks which are then read aloud in the tutorial; some might require students to write a substantial thesis. This model offers close contact with a single faculty member, supports a total immersion in the writing process, and builds the capacity for rigorous thinking and public dialogue.

Web Presence (humanities@vanderbilt)

We will create a Virtual Humanities Center, with video files, audio files, podcasts of lectures and other events, digital art, and transcripts/published versions of interviews with faculty, scholars, and artists-in-residence, postdocs, graduate students, and students engaged in innovative humanistic scholarship. It should be curated by a full-time site manager with arts and humanities training and could employ student interns and/or coordinate with graduate and postgraduate fellows at the Center for Digital Humanities. With sufficient attention and resources, this website could present the humanistic work being done at Vanderbilt to diverse audiences around the world.

Hiring Junior Faculty

Vanderbilt has made great strides by hiring endowed chairs, but the committee believes that now is the time to pursue robust hiring at the assistant professor level in the humanities. The Mellon Fellows program is not an efficient tool for recruiting assistant professors.

Renovation

It is crucial to renovate, retrofit, and maintain the existing buildings in which the ongoing activities of humanities faculty take place, especially Furman Hall and Sarratt Cinema. Imaginative renovation work, such as the one on the third floor of Calhoun, would do much to make older buildings into showcases for Vanderbilt's innovative blending of the old and the new.

Classroom Space

We need more classroom space for discussion-based seminars, particularly because there are many advanced seminars that do not fit at all well into a 50-minute time slot. Some of this space could be created by targeted renovation of buildings (such as Furman Hall), but that will not be sufficient.

TIMELINE

In one year, we could...

- Draw up a detailed prospectus for the concept and function of the Building and seek innovative and imaginative proposals from architectural firms
- Draw up a detailed prospectus for the concept and function of a Vanderbilt Institute for Humanistic Inquiry, prepare a space for an inaugural class of fellows (probably not a full complement) and call for applications for fellowships in 2018-19
- Launch the Humanities@Vanderbilt webpage
- Develop a fundraising plan for a general Humanities Endowment supporting arts and humanities events across campus
- Create a Vanderbilt Alumni Humanities Council, which can provide support, ideas, and speakers for campus events, highlighting the living legacy of Vanderbilt's teaching in the arts and humanities

In two years, we could ...

- Welcome the first class of fellows in the VIHI; hold a symposium to celebrate its first year
- Develop the preliminary plan for the Humanities Building, in conjunction with an architectural firm
- Begin teaching "What is Human?" courses

In five years, we could ...

- Open the new Humanities Building, with a year of events inviting and involving people and organizations from across all our schools and the Nashville community
- Read about the new building in *Architectural Record*, *Icon Magazine*, *MD Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

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