

# MAKING A CASE FOR THE HUMANITIES: ADVOCACY AND AUDIENCE

2012 Modern Language Association Roundtable

**Teresa Mangum, Session Organizer**

2011-12 Chair, MLA Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee  
Director, Obermann Center for Advanced Studies  
Associate Professor of English and Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies  
University of Iowa

<http://obermann.uiowa.edu>



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## 2012 Modern Language Association Roundtable

In recent years, one of the pleasures of serving on the Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee of the Modern Language Association has been planning a roundtable discussion focused on issues that press upon the disciplines represented by our members. At the 2012 convention, the roundtable gathered a unique group of “humanists” to reflect on the ways we have failed in advocating for the humanities and to suggest more effective strategies from their institutionally diverse points of view. Our collaboration as we prepared our remarks also suggested how valuable it is to talk across cultural and higher education sectors. By learning about one another’s work, challenges, contributions, and strategies we can advocate collectively for the humanities with real impact.

One repeated refrain in the session was a call to educate ourselves about our distinctive audiences. Several of the panelists also posed a steely-eyed challenge, urging scholars to examine what the academic humanities have become and to consider how we might rethink our practices if we hope to have a fan base in the twenty-first century. As higher education in general has become more atomized, specialized, and research intensive, humanities scholars work in narrower areas and are more disconnected from their immediate communities. In the sciences, this gap is being addressed by new demands for “societal impact” as a requirement for NEH and NIH grants. In the case of the humanities, organizations like *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life* offer models for publicly engaged approaches to research and teaching that bring students and faculty into direct contact with those communities. Where some in the academic humanities fear (or resent) what they perceive as the unfair demands of non-specialist audiences, the members of this panel see opportunity—for transformative conversations, for newly imagined forms for learning and scholarship in the humanities, for cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral collaborations, and for an approach to audiences invested with the interest and open-mindedness we routinely bring to texts.

The first step for effective advocates, the panelists suggest, might be to listen before homogenizing, vilifying, or exhorting “the public.” The future of the disciplines that form “the humanities” rests on support from administrators, funding agencies, legislators, taxpayers, donors, parents, students, and colleagues in business, engineering, law, medicine,

and the sciences, and the many people who care deeply about ideas, books, tough questions, and thoughtful conversation about difficult topics. How, panelists asked, can we address these diverse audiences on their terms? Given *their* priorities and obligations, what compelling reasons can we offer to show that it is in everyone's interest to advocate for the study of literature and languages? Within any of our potential audiences, even the most skeptical, the panelists agreed, we can find allies. Consider even anecdotal evidence. The National Humanities Alliance reports regularly on members of the Senate and the House who circulate letters of support for cultural organizations like the National Endowment for the Humanities or the National Archives. Thousands of people attend the Chicago Humanities Festival, download TED talks, and support small town theatres and museums. How can we make common cause with those individuals who value approaches to life and learning rooted in reflection, interpretation, engagement, self-knowledge, and profound, abiding curiosity about culture in all its historical and geographical variety? In the deliberately idiosyncratic pastiche of genre as well as opinion that the roundtable format encourages, we invite readers to join us as we extend the reach of the 2012 discussion from a large and lively room of colleagues in Seattle to include you and other supporters of the humanities.

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**Bruce Burgett**

**Professor and Director, Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, University of Washington  
Bothell and Chair, National Advisory Board, Imagining America: Artists and  
Scholars in Public Life**

<http://www.uwb.edu/ias/about/faculty-staff/bruceburgett>

Offered two to three pages and asked to be polemical, I figured I had a choice of two genres: the memo or the manifesto. I chose the latter.

A specter is haunting the humanities—the specter of the future. All of the powers of the old humanities have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this specter: the English professor and Humanities dean; Louis Menand and Martha Nussbaum; tenured radicals and denizens of the faculty lounge.

Ok, so that was a joke—sort of. The serious issue I want to put on our roundtable is that one reason the humanities may represent themselves as not being able to find an audience is because they cannot imagine a future. As Arjun Appadurai (2004) observes of the

cultural disciplines more generally, the humanities tend to be oriented toward the past, toward preservation, toward the stability of divisional economies of knowledge exchange inside and outside of universities. Anything that threatens those orientations quickly becomes a “crisis,” one that results from a sense of the “humanities” as having lost either their public or their public justification. The trouble with this framing of the cultural or humanistic, Appadurai suggests, is that the orientation toward the past cedes the future to the disciplines, divisions, and sectors this session invites us to imagine ourselves as speaking with: business, medicine, law, engineering, the social and natural sciences. In response, Appadurai argues for a future-oriented understanding of the cultural, one that is particularly suited to nurturing in individuals and collectives what he calls the “capacity to aspire”—the capacity to imagine and effect different futures.<sup>1</sup>

Appadurai’s point is valuable. Extending it, what I want to emphasize is that this sort of reorientation is going to take serious institutional and organizational labor.<sup>2</sup> I come to this emphasis as a result of my current professional commitments—one might call them service commitments—to four institutions dedicated, in different ways and to different degrees, to fostering interdisciplinary and intersectoral work across the humanities, both inside and outside institutions of higher education. I direct a non-departmentalized School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington Bothell; I serve on the Executive Board of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, where I co-direct a graduate certificate in public scholarship; I sit on the Board of Trustees of Humanities Washington (the humanities council for the state of Washington); and I chair the National Advisory Board of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, a consortium of about 100 colleges and universities dedicated to strengthening the public and civic purposes of humanities, arts, and design.

What would it take to embed a future-oriented, transformational, cross-disciplinary, and cross-sectoral humanities in these diverse institutional contexts? In each case, we would need to abandon (Teresa said to be polemic) the divisional model of the humanities. With no apparent justification in the present tense, the divisional model structures most universities (humanities divisions) and many federal programs (the National Endowment for the

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition,” *Culture and Public Action*, eds. Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 59-84,

<sup>2</sup> Institutional work is “service.”

Humanities). It actively discourages the types of conversations and collaborations Teresa asked us to think and talk about. It creates and reinforces preservationist and transactional thinking; it encourages us to respond to the so-called “crisis of the humanities” by mobilizing to save forms of the humanities in which many of us are no longer invested, especially after several decades of persistent and justified critique emerging from social movements outside the university and insurgent forms of interdisciplinarity inside the university. It enforces forms of professional socialization and accounting metrics that not only make conversation and collaboration difficult, but make cross-divisional intelligibility impossible.

One way for me to test the viability of this polemic is to imagine how the humanities institutions with which I am involved might respond to the claim that the crisis of the divisional model of the humanities is long overdue. At the Simpson Center for the Humanities, this claim would likely be received as impolitic since it would surface implicit tensions between commitments to the transactional and transformational humanities at UW Seattle. In the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at UW Bothell, it might annoy a few faculty members who would like to preserve the traditional humanities, but it would largely be ignored since we have no “humanities” division that could be in “crisis.” At Humanities Washington, it would be heard as something that only one of the “academic humanists” on the board would say.<sup>3</sup> At Imagining America, it would be understood as part of our mission, even as it would raise concerns about alienating more traditional humanists within our member institutions, including chairs and deans who might raise an eyebrow, skeptical of what the organization can do for their department or division.

How is the polemic received at the MLA? My guess—you can tell me if I’m wrong—is that it is heard positively to the degree that it is aligned with the critical interdisciplinarity that has long structured many aspects of the fields of language and literature. Many at the MLA would likely embrace the claim that the inherited intellectual and institutional structure of the humanities is in need of serious transformation.<sup>4</sup> An orientation to the future means that we need to continue to do the intellectual and organizational work of remapping the chronotypical field imaginaries that structure disciplines like history and literature, of

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<sup>3</sup> Humanities Washington is committed ideologically, not structurally, to the concept of the humanities; the University of Washington is committed structurally, not ideologically, to the concept.

<sup>4</sup> “The truth is that most of us had to leave the humanities in order to do serious work in it” (Stuart Hall, “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities,” *October* 53 (Summer 1990), 11-23, pp. 3-4.

archiving and teaching social histories and multicultural canons that speak our students' lives and aspirations, and of inventing interpretative heuristics capable of naming and responding to the problematics of the present and the future. I also imagine that my polemic creates a sense of unease among some in the audience. Sure, I agree with what you say, that the world is larger than the humanities, but I still work in an English department. We are in crisis.

Humanists of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your crisis.

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**Susan Jeffords**

**Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, University of Washington Bothell**

<http://www.uwb.edu/academic/about/biography>

*What I will not make a case for:*

- Humanities departments as they currently exist.
- Humanities PhD programs as they are currently structured.
- Many of the structures of current humanities discourses - defensiveness, victimization, under appreciation, etc.

*What I will make a case for:*

- Integration of humanities projects, curricula, and discourses into other institutional locations. For example, should philosophy have branches in medicine, law, biology?
- Integration of humanities faculty into other units - artists in physics departments, foreign language and literature scholars in political science or global health departments, or historians in public health departments.
- Increasing partnerships between humanities faculty/programs and community organizations.

*I know what the objections will be to these ideas:*

- I am making the humanities subservient to other disciplines (why do they get to keep their departments and we don't?).
- Humanities scholars will get swallowed up by these units and will be forced to adapt their scholarship to meet other field needs.
- No one will ever get tenure.

*Here are my answers to these objections:*

- These changes would not make the humanities subservient but would instead affirm the institution-wide value of the humanities as fundamentally connected to everything that universities teach.
- Well, yes. I think adapting humanities scholarship to be in conversation with other fields is a good thing.
- Tenure will still be granted by humanities colleagues, not those in the "new" unit.

I make the case for the humanities infusing across the university the perspectives and capabilities that students learn in humanities classes - how to see, think, and engage differently with the world, whether the world immediately around us, the worlds of our past, or the worlds of our imaginations.

*What might this look like?*

- Humanities departments would be reconstructed to resemble loose affiliations that would coordinate humanities faculty across the university. We would have no need for many smaller (or, in the cases of English, one big) units; instead, a university would have a humanities division in which there would be working groups defined by support needs rather than by nations, topics, languages, or historical periods.
- Humanities residencies would allow humanities faculty to spend 3-5 years in renewable residencies units other than their own, co-teaching classes, joining in discipline-based symposia and research collaborations, and developing new courses.
- Humanities faculty would develop research symposia in collaboration with colleagues in these "off-site" units, ideally with support from university resources for speakers, graduate assistants, new course development funds, and other opportunities.
- Poets in computer science departments, philosophers in medical schools, foreign language and literature scholars in global health, ethnic studies scholars in architecture and community planning, and so on. We already have fine models in scholars such as Priscilla Wald of Duke University, who works with geneticists as well as literature scholars; David Maurasse, who is both an adjunct associate professor in Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and the founder and president of Marga Incorporated, a consulting firm that connects philanthropists and public partners with colleges and universities; or Cathy Davidson of Duke University,

a literature scholar and co-founder of HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Sciences, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory), who engages with technologists and other visionaries worldwide and now serves on the National Council on the Humanities.

*Why would we want to do this?*

- This is the right thing for students.
- It is the right thing for universities.
- It will help us move the humanities into a new phase of renewed growth and value.

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**Barbara McFadden Allen**

**Executive Director, Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC)**

<http://www.cic.net/home>

In my position as Executive Director of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), I report to the provosts of thirteen research universities (the members of the Big “Ten” Athletic Conference and the University of Chicago). The CIC assists in collaborations across these universities—from coordinating large-scale academic and technical projects to facilitating effective networks of peers across the institutions such as graduate deans, vice presidents for research, librarians, or English department chairs. As a supporter of the humanities, I frequently encounter the need to explain the value and importance of these disciplines both inside and outside university settings. Fortunately, every campus has professionals who can help craft that message for those who know how to speak their language.

If you are interested in conveying a message about the importance of the humanities, an awareness of and alignment with the messaging apparatus for your university or college will be an important part of a successful strategy. In this regard, it is helpful to frame this for yourself as a campaign, rather than a single event. As Marge Piercy observed in “The Seven of Pentacles”:

*Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.*

*You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.*

*More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.*

Most universities have a strategy for managing communications about the institution. Knowing how this strategy works can be invaluable to position the humanities within the larger story of the university and can enable you to reach a broader audience more quickly and with greater impact. Further, finding ways to connect the humanities to the news of the day and our everyday lives can help demystify the work of the scholar. Effective communications can amplify the impact of scholarship; enable you to reach potential students; and quite possibly help to preserve and enhance access to unique and precious intellectual resources.

As in most large, complex organizations, at your college or university a mix of focused messaging and reaction to issues or crisis may drive your institution's communication strategy. The key is to understand how the university builds and manages these messages and then to do all you can to influence the process helpfully. In today's world, there is no office of available journalists sitting around waiting to develop "press releases." To be successful, you must accept responsibility for reaching out, shepherding, and delivering the message. Here are a few practical steps you can take to enhance your ability to embed messages about the humanities into the "story" about your university:

### ***Understand how your campus shapes messages***

Schedule a meeting with your university relations officers and/or their staff. Come to this meeting with a "beginner's mind" and a sincere desire to understand how the university messages are shaped. Ask one question: how can I be helpful in supporting your office? And then listen to the advice. You'll likely find that your colleagues are eager to have topical data points on a regular basis for inclusion in speeches, articles, and social media.

### ***Develop skills for connecting with the media***

You can't expect others to convey and carry your message if you do not first understand the message and audience yourself. Develop no more than three concise talking points on the subject—whether "the value of the humanities" or, better yet, a concrete example of an exciting project that illustrates that value—and practice sharing those points to refine them. Be prepared and disciplined when actually speaking to the media (whether talking to your campus news manager or the *New York Times*); stick to your talking points; and don't answer questions that you are unqualified to answer or offer comments you don't want to see in print.

If you see something in the news that you think has a relationship to your work, call your university relations office and point this out and explain the connection in a way they can use in a story for the campus or the community. For example, there may be a national news story regarding new words in the English language—and you know something about that. That’s a perfect opportunity to make the connection between a large issue, the humanities, and your local university. You must also overcome the academic natural inclination to defer to the “known expert” within a discipline. For purposes of getting your message out, you must accept your responsibility to be the expert within your university or college.

***Support your university leadership in developing messages and embedding them into their talking points***

Make a point of meeting the speechwriters for the president and provost. Ask how you can be helpful in providing talking points or information to shape future talks. The President is out talking about the university all the time—you can be helpful in embedding messages about the humanities. The very act of establishing the relationship and being helpful can set the stage for ongoing, productive engagement as the President refines messages or addresses various audiences.

Institutional strategies, by nature, are complex and sometimes unwieldy. Navigating the system requires patience and persistence. Success in this arena is dependent upon an understanding of the process, a respect for the people and the process, and a willingness to follow the advice given.

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**Esther Mackintosh**

**President, Federation of State Humanities Councils**

<http://www.statehumanities.org/>

As the President of Federation of State Humanities Councils, I am frequently faced with the task of explaining not only why the humanities are valuable but what “the humanities” means. At a recent hearing of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, the businessman from Wyoming who testified on behalf of the Federation began his remarks by observing that if he had been asked several years ago what the humanities were he would have not have known what to say. After several years of serving on the board of the Wyoming

Humanities Council, he said, he now believes that the humanities are the experiences, the stories, the ideas, and the words that we share as human beings and that help us to expand our understanding of the world. “Our lives were meant to be shared,” he said, “and the humanities are our vehicle for doing that.”

This is an articulate expression of at least one way the public sees and experiences the humanities. All of us working in the humanities, whether in the academy or the public square, have frequent anxious conversations about the future of the humanities, which are undeniably underfunded and to our minds unappreciated. The public, however, some of whom, like our businessman, are at a loss to define the humanities, nevertheless embrace the “doing” of the humanities at every opportunity. What we have learned in the state humanities councils community is that among members of the public, there is a genuine and widespread hunger to talk about things that matter, which is what the humanities help all of us do. Members of the public recognize that in order to move forward and shape a livable future, it is critical for us to try to understand other points of view, learn how other people in other times and places have addressed issues that divide them, and find the common ground that will allow us to live together productively. They understand that such an effort is critical if we are to maintain a democratic society.

Through forty years of interacting with the citizens in their communities, and of connecting scholars with those citizens through public programs, the state councils have accumulated a significant body of experience with how members of the public view the humanities and what they believe they gain from engaging in humanities programs. In the early years, some of what councils learned was clearly what not to do. Because their earliest legislative mandate was to bring the humanities to bear on public policy issues, the council annals recount, for example, a lecture on *Madame Bovary* to illuminate the problem of ensuring good medical care in rural areas, or a detailed analysis of a Wordsworth poem as part of a year-long emphasis on environmental issues. This kind of programming prompted a blunt declaration from William Bennett, an early chairman of the NEH, that state councils programs were boring. “You force humanists to talk about things they know nothing about,” he said. “It doesn’t show humanists at their best.” The comment was not well received but it did in fact capture an unwelcome truth. The councils and their scholars had not yet developed a means of genuine engagement with the public.

We have learned in the ensuing decades that among the things required to engage the public with the humanities is an adjustment in how scholars think about their roles and how those of us who work to connect scholars and the public think about the shape that connection should take. This was captured nicely by a professor of literature reflecting on his service as a facilitator for a series of text-based discussions supported by one of the humanities councils. This professor had spent his career guiding students through understanding and analysis of texts, which was a skill that was still pertinent in this facilitator role. But what he learned the public was looking for in these discussions was not so much an analysis of the text as a fuller understanding of issues the text helped illuminate. He wasn't there to teach participants everything there was to know about the text but rather to put the questions that brought the group together in the center of the room and to use the text to explore those questions.

When the public recognizes the genuine possibility, through humanities texts and programs, to put their own individual lives in context and to strengthen the communities in which they live, the humanities then become a living thing. The key is to persuade members of the public that the humanities are not just a set of disciplines but a tool that can open lines of communication and dialogue, generate ideas, and show us how the issues we confront have been handled by people in other times and places. The job of the professional humanist then becomes a matter of *evoking* the humanities through a focus on a text or a film, combined with the interplay between the scholar and members of the group, as well as *among* those members.

The publics that are drawn into these humanities programs are sometimes unexpected. Several years ago the Maine Humanities Council created a program called "Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Health Care," designed to bring medical professionals from various levels together with a scholar/facilitator to explore, through a literary text, issues of importance to their work as a community of caregivers. Scholars participate in the selection of the texts and the design of the programs and serve as facilitators for the discussions, which take place monthly for six months in hospitals and other medical facilities. The structured but informal discussions allow participants to step out of their professional roles and explore the human dimensions of their work, using the lens of literature to reflect with their colleagues on the responsibilities of their day-to-day work and the relationships they maintain with patients and others. The program has been credited with improving patient care, increasing cultural awareness among medical professionals, and

improving communication skills. The program, which is now conducted by 26 state councils, has recently expanded into VA hospitals to serve the caregivers of veterans.

The Maryland Humanities Council also served a specialized group of public citizens in a way that led to a far-reaching impact on an entire group of communities. With a grant from the Boeing Foundation, the Maryland council created a program called “Practicing Democracy,” which took as its aim to stimulate civil conversation among participants with diverse viewpoints on difficult and divisive issues. Again, scholars were involved in designing the program and serving as discussion leaders. One of the four “Practicing Democracy” programs took place in an Eastern Shore county with a long-standing agricultural identity, now facing the challenge of resolving development and land use issues created by the expanding role of the county as a cluster of “bedroom” communities serving nearby urban areas. The unproductive shouting matches that erupted at a number of public meetings and the stalemate in reaching any resolution prompted county officials to join the humanities council in creating a series of private facilitated conversations, each beginning with a piece of literature or a film. The group members, who included representatives from the planning and zoning commission, the economic development commission, the public schools system, realtors, developers, business leaders, farmers, and others, found that their conversations became more respectful and productive with each session. At the conclusion of the three initially planned sessions, they agreed to retain their scholar/facilitator and the stage-setting texts and to continue the discussions, which have in turn enabled them to foster civil discussions among the stakeholders in their communities.

This involvement of citizens themselves in the creation of programs that help them understand their own history and find the sources of their common ground is one of the strengths of the programs that councils support and conduct. The scholars who are successful in participating in these programs are those who are willing to meet these citizens where they are and join with them in the process of understanding the context in which they live and work.

This may also mean changing the language in which we are accustomed to talking about the humanities. Humanities Montana, in a recent brochure urging members of the public to support the council’s activities, explained in clear and concise terms three values they believed the council and its public held in common: 1) Our kids are our most valuable resource, 2) We need to understand our past and present in order to understand our future,

and 3) Communities are strengthened one conversation at a time. Beneath each of these assertions the council offered a brief description of the programs the council supports that respond to these beliefs. The word “humanities” was not used in this message. Rather the focus is on the issues the humanities help to illuminate and the experiences the members of the public might have when they engage with the humanities.

In recent years councils—and the scholars with whom they have successful relationships—have discovered that the partners they enlist in support of humanities programs are also key. When a council collaborates with a well-known farmers’ organization in the state or a state government social service agency or a local hospital, they not only increase understanding of the humanities among the people in those institutions, they also demonstrate to the public that the humanities live in the places and among the organizations and people who make up their daily lives.

Daily lives are important to the participants in state humanities council programs, but this does not mean that the humanities are trivialized or over-simplified. Rather, it means that the humanities help them make sense of their lives, individually and in community. The humanities help them understand the broader world and see their own lives in a larger context. The humanities, as our Wyoming businessman observed, provide the means of sharing our lives and learning from the lives to which the humanities give us access.

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**Scott Jaschik**

**Editor and Co-founder, *Inside Higher Ed***

<http://www.insidehighered.com/>

During the last few years, I have written and edited numerous articles about the “humanities under siege”—stories about programs being cut, requirements being eased, scholarship being lost, academics struggling to find jobs or to hold on to them. It has been a period when universities that state they have global missions have felt no shame about eliminating foreign language departments, a time when a liberal arts college could decide that classics as a field of study was no longer needed.

In reporting on these issues, I have encountered numerous arguments put forth in defense of the role of the humanities – in the life of the American college or university and, by extension, in the life of American society. Frequently I have found myself thinking “Yes, that

argument makes sense to me, but there is no way that rhetoric is going to sway the administrators being assailed – let alone members of the public or politicians.”

Given the severe budget pressures placed on many colleges and universities, I can't assert with any confidence that if the arguments made on behalf of the humanities were a little stronger, or reflected my critique below, that anything would have changed. It's also the case that there are fierce advocates for the humanities (including of course the Modern Language Association) working very hard on their behalf and chalking up some wins – and doing so without the lobbying budgets of others seeking funding today.

But I can't help but think that there are ways that many individual humanities scholars and their leaders could improve their arguments with the press, the public, and the political powers that be.

### ***Burst out of the academic bubble***

Too many of the arguments I hear sound perfect for those who read *Inside Higher Ed* or listen to NPR, but would go nowhere on Fox News. People say things like “well of course to be an educated citizen, everyone knows you need to study....” Don't assume that everyone knows that, or has any idea why you would think that way. Don't assume everyone views a liberal arts education as superior to professional training. You might be horrified about a world in which most people don't read novels or have much awareness of foreign cultures. But many people don't. If you frame your arguments in ways that suggest everyone agrees, you can lose before you have even stated your case. Similarly, arguments that begin with Republican-bashing automatically exclude the possibility of winning over Republican support. Think about framing arguments that would succeed in the media outlets you don't rely on and with the politicians you don't vote for.

### ***Try not to rely on academic circumstances that may not make sense to those outside of academe***

Tenure is a perfect example of something that most academics feel is vital to promote true intellectual freedom. Yet, too often, I hear arguments made about tenure that can jar the non-academic. I have worked my entire career and will work my entire career without tenure. For my non-academic friends, that's the norm (with the possible exception of lawyers who have achieved partnership status in firms). Most Americans today have job security closer to the adjuncts who will be reading this than to those of you with tenure. This isn't to say that

you shouldn't argue for tenure or for the value of other academic traditions that most Americans don't enjoy (such as sabbaticals). But in doing so, can you make your case in a way that is understandable to those of us who will never have that kind of job security? Why is it good for American society that academics have this freedom? I believe that there are great ways to answer that question, but assuming that everyone will see why tenure is good is not a wise approach.

### ***Avoid academic jargon***

Many humanities professors will explain why their programs are vital by saying things like “we need to teach students critical thinking” or “students need global skills.” Or “general education is crucial.” Many people outside academe have no idea what any of that means. If you can say that your career center documents that students with foreign language skills get better jobs in the business world than those who don't, that's a fact people can relate to.

Focus on students. Many people in American society – people in all walks of life – feel that their jobs are more demanding and that it is more and more difficult for them to keep up. So arguments like “my classes keep getting larger” may not be effective. But talking about what this means to students may resonate. Many professors report that they can't assign as much work when class size grows, so students don't get as much feedback. When sections are eliminated, students miss out on prerequisites and may be forced to take longer to complete their degrees. These kinds of arguments focus on students – and are more likely to influence your neighbors and legislators (the parents of said students).

### ***“Relevance” can be a double-edged sword***

I hear many arguments along the lines of “we need to keep foreign language programs alive because our country needs people who really understand Afghanistan and Iran.” Or “businesses need to hire people who actually can write a decent memo.” Both of these statements are true. But ... let's be honest. How many of your students are studying Pashto or Farsi? If liberal arts professors believe that there is inherent value in the close reading of novels and in learning to better understand other cultures (even when there are no foreign relations issues pending), perhaps it's time to make that case. When lobbying for Title VI funds, the relevance argument makes a lot of sense. But if you are trying to save a French department, or trying to make sure your English department teaches poetry as well as business writing, I'm not sure relevance alone will be effective.

### ***Think about the big picture trends in state budgets***

In the past few years, we've seen some politicians elected on "pro education" platforms who promptly turned around and started proposing cuts. We've also seen the election of some governors and legislators who were incredibly explicit in their campaigns that they would attempt to solve just about every state budget problem through spending cuts. When candidates for public office make such pledges, they don't need to say that they will cut the higher education budget for you to know they will do so. Many categories of state spending are protected by entitlement status, federal requirements, or political realities. So it's almost impossible to make major cuts to state budgets without cutting spending on higher education. This varies by state and campus, but I'm struck by cases where campuses are quiet as states make fiscal decisions that will require higher education budgets to be hacked, and then seem surprised by the extent of cuts proposed. I cannot help but wonder if – in some cases – humanities advocates (and higher education advocates more broadly) missed the point in time when they would have been more influential.

I'll close by saying that it's easier to be a journalist observing advocacy efforts than to pull off successful advocacy efforts. So my suggestions in no way imply that there are silver bullets to the challenges many of you face today. And personally I relate to many of the arguments that I suggest may not work with the public at large. I was an undergraduate history major, and never took a journalism course in my life, but I believe my liberal arts education trained me well.

## Obermann Center for Advanced Studies

<http://obermann.uiowa.edu/>



The **Obermann Center for Advanced Studies** is a vital part of the University of Iowa's intellectual life, bridging disciplines and providing artists, scholars, and researchers physical and intellectual space in which to pursue their work. The Center supports seven fellows-in-residence each semester and funds summer interdisciplinary research teams, a summer research seminar, and working groups, programs which include external as well as UI faculty members. The Center also encourages publicly engaged scholarship. A highly competitive Graduate Institute on Engagement and the Academy and an annual humanities symposium for the campus and larger community are just two of our many public programs. The October 2012 symposium focuses on the Latino Midwest.

## Committee on Institutional Cooperation

[www.cic.net](http://www.cic.net)



Headquartered in the Midwest, the **Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC)** is a consortium of the Big Ten universities plus the University of Chicago. For more than half a century, these 13 world-class research institutions have advanced their academic missions, generated unique opportunities for students and faculty, and served the common good by sharing expertise, leveraging campus resources, and collaborating on innovative programs. Governed and funded by the Provosts of the member universities, CIC mandates are coordinated by a staff from its Champaign, Illinois, headquarters.