

Language, Linguistics, and Literary Studies: Teaching Humanities in Small-college America

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The students of the private, undergraduate institution at which I have taught English for 25 years need Humanities instruction more than ever. Their privileged status in the world is complicated, but indisputable; and American culture is such that their world view tends to be narrowly focused on their own lives. It is easy to see such students on a conveyor belt to capitalist success, positivism and western hegemony. But when I teach, I am confronted not by a social category but by human beings. As a teacher, I hope I can help them along the path to greater self-knowledge and ethical understanding, and often I find them willing, even eager, to explore it. Humanities enrollments at Roanoke College are shrinking in favor of seemingly more practical and useful tracks. In my department, the decline in Literature enrollments, coupled with the effects of the economic downturn, have pressured us to cut offerings and redirect our teaching. The demand for clearly mapped career paths has resulted in rapid growth in Communication Studies and a planned Editing and Publishing Concentration. At the same time, our Literature program has evolved with the discipline from an emphasis on the British and American traditions, to one that defines literature globally and explores its complex cultural roles. A paradoxical result is that our majors, though fewer, are drawn to the program by aptitude and passion in the face of a fairly stiff wind; the overall quality of their work has risen. In addition, our increased teaching of cross-disciplinary concentrations and general education means that we spread Humanities instruction more broadly than ever across the student body. I remain guardedly hopeful of undergraduate Humanities teaching as part of the struggle for a more equitable world.

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