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Linguistic and Literary Studies in the 21st Century**

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Entre letras y ciencias: Linguistic and Literary Studies in the 21st Century

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Although his close friends and family feared for his sanity, there are several moments in *Don Quixote* in which the knight demonstrates he is both lucid and capable of discussing important topics profoundly. Toward the end of the first part, his friends, the priest and barber, have devised a plan to bring him back home under the guise of assisting the Princess Micomicona. As they travel back toward some place in La Mancha, they rest for a night at Juan Palomeque's inn. There, while the others dine, Don Quixote launches into a discourse on *armas y letras*, in which he compares the relative suffering of students to the far more exceeding pains felt by those who choose the life of a knight. In the discourse, he gives what I believe to be one of the best descriptions of the life of a graduate student:

Digo pues, que los trabajos del estudiante son éstos: principalmente pobreza..., y en haber dicho que padece pobreza, me parece que no había que decir más de su mala ventura, porque quien es pobre no tiene cosa buena. Esta pobreza la padece por sus partes, ya en hambre, ya en frío, ya en desnudez, ya en todo junto. (Part I, Ch. 38)

While graduate students may be able to identify with the physical and mental fatigue Don Quixote describes, there are few who would compare the professional academic with military officers. There is, however, a more prevalent division in our society, not between *armas y letras*, but between *letras y ciencias*. In the United States and around the world there is a growing trend to create an artificial divide between the humanities and the sciences. The push for increased funding and emphasis on STEM education ignores the important role that the humanities and languages play in a university education. Equally disconcerting is the number of humanists who would shun the advances of technology that offer new avenues of teaching and research.

As access to college education has increased across the country, so too has the concern regarding the extent to which university studies benefit individual students. Increased tuition prices and the burden of student loans have brought many people to think of education in the stark terms of a financial cost/benefit analysis. Putting things in economic terms can lead to the false assumption that the average pay rates of past graduates is the best indicator of the merits of

certain academic majors. STEM careers begin to be overemphasized for their perceived practical benefit to society, while disregarding the significance of the humanistic endeavors that form the foundation of modern education.

In the 2007 commencement address at Bellarmine University, Wendell Berry took a hard line stance against this emphasis on STEM:

The course of study called STEM is in reality only a sort of job training for upward (and lateral) mobility. It is also a subsidy granted to the corporations, which in a system of free enterprise might reasonably be expected to do their own job training. And in the great university even the higher job training is obstructed by the hustle of anxiety of ‘research,’ often involving yet another corporate raid on the public domain. (qtd. in Walker)

A university education without the humanities is nothing more than technical training. Studying language and literature is a fundamental aspect of a well-rounded university education. Learning a new language, at even a basic level, opens the world to discovering new cultures and societies that are inaccessible to the monolingual. Research in linguistics gives further insight into the use and development of language in ways that increase our understanding of interpersonal and mass communication. The study of world literature counteracts the natural tendencies of tribalism and isolationism that cause misunderstandings and conflict. No student can say they have a true education without some training in these areas.

Affirming such things in this platform is, perhaps, simply preaching to the choir. One might easily assume that readers of this journal are predisposed to agree with me. But I do not mean to say that we should shun subjects that fall outside of our own fields of language and literature (however mindnumbingly boring they may seem compared to our own fascinating subject matter). As academics, we strive to continually expand the boundaries of knowledge. Each of us does our own small part in a greater collective effort to know more about the world and universe in which we live. Graduate studies allow students to specialize in a particular field, giving them the ability to contribute to this greater endeavor. Unfortunately, one negative side effect is the potential for developing a myopic attitude toward knowledge, forgetting the importance of others’ efforts.

There are many humanists who acknowledge their own lack of expertise when it comes to science, math, or technology. This unfamiliarity with another field is not, in itself, troubling, but what is disconcerting is the sense of pride some seem to evoke when they claim such ignorance. The term “technology” is shunned as nothing more than a shiny new thing some administrator thought would help cut costs, raise the institutional profile, or increase revenue streams.

The self-styled Luddite makes no serious effort to understand the value of new technologies in pedagogy or research.

Educational institutions have a duty to conserve the work of past academics who have expanded our understanding of the world. But as humanists, we must resist the urge to turn this imperative to preserve knowledge into a sense of complacency in our own teaching and research. We should embrace the use of technology by seeing it as a spectrum that includes the printed book, chalkboards, web sites, and social media networks. We should seek out the best tools, both old and new, that help us increase knowledge and educate our students.

There are cultural forces that threaten the viability of university studies in language and literature. The specters of budget cuts, anti-intellectualism, and radical nationalism loom large. We must steel ourselves for the challenges that come by continually updating our curriculum to meet the needs of our learners. When some say that universities should focus solely on the study of STEM subjects, we should respond forcefully about the societal benefits of studying languages and literature. We should, like Don Quixote, be prepared to fight against whatever giant stands in our path. But before we charge into battle, we should listen to our inner-Sancho who will tell us if we are fighting against true giants bent on defunding language programs or simply a new form of wind turbine technology that can provide clean energy at a relatively low cost.

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