CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Talking with Poets about Taxes: Applying the Humanities at a Regional Public

N. Christine Brookes* [ID] and Gregory Smith* [ID]

Department of History, World Languages, and Cultures, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI, USA
Corresponding author: N. Christine Brookes; Email: brook1nc@cmich.edu

Abstract

Here, we describe the creation of a new program, Public and Applied Liberal Arts, at a regional public university in the Midwest. We discuss the values of transdisciplinary research and teaching for the public good, and how we put together a willing group of faculty from across the university to create a new kind of academic program that moves the humanities into our communities and beyond.

Keywords: pedagogy; practice; applied humanities; liberal arts; transdisciplinary

In 1926, the Russian Futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky wondered in "Talking with the Taxman about Poetry" where the poet belongs in a regime that celebrated the proletariat.[1]

> *Citizen tax collector!*
>
> *Excuse me for disturbing you...*
>
> *Thank you...*
>
> *don't bother...*
>
> *I'll stand...*
>
> *I have here*
>
> *a business*
>
> *of delicate nature:*
>
> *about the place*
>
> *of the poet*
>
> *in the workers society.*

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*The authors co-direct the new Public and Applied Liberal Arts program at CMU.
  [1] Mayakovsky 1926, 100.

A century later, humanists find themselves echoing that query. What is our role and relevance in American higher education, where institutions, in response to grinding pressure from efficiency-minded stakeholders, are awash in the dehumanized language of assessment, marketing, metrics, strategic plans, and, yes, even taxes? Since our expertise centers quite precisely on the place of human beings in the world, in ways that go beyond the strictly countable, scholars of the liberal arts may well ask if there is a place for us at the table. Why does what we and our students do matter? How do we all help to answer urgent questions? How do we communicate that? What value does our expertise hold for us? And for others?

This is something the two of us have been thinking about for a long time. We have chaired our departments through the Great Unenrollment in our respective fields, the precipitous drop in student numbers in history and world languages.[2] There's no need for us to rehash this because anyone in the humanities now knows the story too well. For humanist academics who have been paying attention over recent years, there has been plenty of negative press about our fields, from an infamous if unintentional knock on art history in 2014 (et tu, Mr. President?) to the more recent barnburner of an article in the *New Yorker* about the end of the English major.[3] It's hard to keep the faith when these pronouncements buffet us at every turn. We're also part of a regional public university located in the hardscrabble heart of Michigan. We offer good value—a sound ROI for just about anyone willing to do the math—but lacking both flagship status and an urban campus has hurt us in recent years.[4] News of other universities, including flagships, closing down programs that look like ours has not made it easier to sleep. It has often seemed to us and our colleagues that there is little chance of escape from a dispiriting combination of disaster and irrelevance. What if the Titanic sank and nobody cared?

Undaunted, and unwontedly optimistic about the possibility of proving that the humanities make a difference (even in the middle of Michigan), we joined forces to woo both administrators and fellow faculty across the university. *We have something valuable to offer to your [any applied field here] student! Don't you know? (Yes, you do.) We're what businesses and industries are asking for. We take people very, very seriously. We teach four-dimensional empathy. We take what you do and make it So. Much. Better.* We argued the point in meetings, collaborative events, and initiatives on campus and in our community. While we found enthusiastic support, at least in words, the tangible return on our investment was hard to measure. And then the pandemic sauntered in, a promising existential crisis not just for the humanities but also, and perhaps especially, for a rural regional public university like ours. Our concerns about value and identity had become worries about survival.

Several years later (or the blink of an eye, in higher-ed time), we've launched a new major, Public and Applied Liberal Arts (PALA). PALA responds to declining enrollments, to be sure, but it also articulates what is at once a very old and a very new approach to how the humanities (and social sciences) are taught. While we have no pudding proof yet, initial enrollments and the buzz about our program on campus indicate that we're on to something. Taking our cue from the University of Arizona's Public and Applied Humanities program, PALA combines intensive immersion in what the humanities do best—reflective research, deep contextualization, responsive communication, and storytelling—with equally intensive training in an applied field like entrepreneurship, environmental

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[2] Brookins 2023; Lusin et al. 2023, 2.
[3] Villacorta 2014; Heller 2023.
[4] Marcus 2022; Gardner 2023.

resilience, or fashion design. In line with colleagues in the public and applied humanities across the nation, we emphasize public-facing and public-serving work for the common good, accomplished through collaboration and realized in our community.[5]

In response to widespread anxieties about our purpose and future as humanists in higher ed and society, our thinking around the new program offers a combination of optimism and practicality. What we're offering here, therefore, is part vision-manifesto about the values of transdisciplinary research and teaching for the public good, and part how-to manual for putting together a crack team of absurdist poets (or at least English, French, classics, and religion professors) to create a new kind of academic program that moves the humanities into our communities, where the people are.[6]

Given these relentless waves of bad news for our professions and institutions, it has been no small feat to dream up a new program. (And by "new," we really mean new, not just rebranded or reshuffled versions of our old majors.) With the depressing, we also found cause for hope from our colleagues at the University of Arizona and their phenom of a program, launched in 2018. At roughly the same time, the National Humanities Alliance began community discussions about the place of public and applied humanities, bringing together practitioners from all corners of the nation.[7] The momentum was growing. We took all of this to heart.

To put a finer point on it: Alain-Philippe Durand and Christine Henseler have called us to "hope" by "making our disciplines more 'verb-like' in partnership with an array of disciplines and professional fields, and in collaboration with the for- and non-profit business industries... because the humanities can have real, transformative potential."[8] We believed this wholeheartedly. The trick, however, was figuring out how we retool to make our own humanities practices more active and concrete on a campus like ours. Sure, the University of Arizona—a flagship land-grant university in the Sun Belt—has had remarkable success with public and applied humanities. But what about our campus, in the upper Midwest, in a state whose relationship to Arizona's population growth in recent decades might be described charitably as "inverse"? Could we pull off something similar? Would it be enough to breathe life (and revenue) into our humanities enterprise?

As we took stock of what we might do and how, we knew that we needed to build a team. We were also aware, from hard-won experience in discussions about department mergers, budget restrictions, and program reconfigurations, that we'd meet resistance. Proposing something sufficiently new could land flat or awkwardly at best. At worst, it might kick off a curricular counterrevolution with our heads on pikes. We started with those we suspected would be open to the idea because of what they had already been doing: interdisciplinary work across departments and colleges, public-facing teaching and scholarship, and industry-

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[5] Fisher-Livne and May-Curry 2024, 10.

[6] According to Leavy (2011), "transdisciplinarity" is defined as the following: "Transdisciplinary research practices are issue- or problem-centered approaches to research that prioritize the problem at the center of research over discipline-specific concerns, theories or methods. Transdisciplinary research is responsive to (public) needs. Transdisciplinarity research practices transcend disciplinary borders and open up entirely new research pathways. Transdisciplinarity builds new knowledge-building practices" (14).

[7] See the work of the National Humanities Alliance on the Humanities for All website (Humanities for All 2025).

[8] Durand and Henseler 2023, 5.

related projects and collaborations. We looked for partners in applied fields who were doing the same. And we began informal discussions.

Not everyone was convinced. Territoriality was fierce, and novelty did not work in our favor. For many (and almost certainly most) in the academy, disciplinary labels amount to fundamental statements of identity. Moving beyond whatever well-defined niche we've carved out for ourselves is unimaginable, verging on heretical. So, while many had heard of and worked in the business, digital, environmental, and medical humanities, breaking out of the disciplinary framework and departmental boundaries to work on what we were kicking around was, for some, a bridge too far. Here, we know that we were not alone.

But that initial work inspired potential paths forward, along with curiosity. When we decided, maybe a little stubbornly, to create the major, we asked for applications for the program council. We wanted to gage interest and ideas, even vision. We found our people: two literary specialists, a scholar of religion, a geographer, and an industrial organizational psychologist. We got to work together for an intensive 2-day workshop, and talked, proposed, argued, and agreed. We loved meeting with each other ("most fun meetings ever!" was heard more than once), and our collective creative juices were flowing. Over the course of a summer, we built something exciting that was both cutting edge and responsive to our students' needs and to our campus realities. The campus agreed with us. We flew through our curricular process and accumulated fans and support along the way. The first class kicked off, roughly a year since the program's inception, with very little formal publicity.

Though we're newly hatched, we have the optimistic temerity to offer some words of advice. To colleagues across the nation who find themselves in related places: as you begin to imagine what might be possible on your campus, here are some things we've learned.

1. **Quit being a lone (humanities) wolf.** You can't build a program or initiative that is all about teamwork and community on your own. So, first things first. Work with folks who can work together. Draw up your courses and program as a team, from student learning objectives to the nitty gritty details of assignments and final projects. Scaffold it all together, as a team. Argue about the adverbs. Collective work is good for the soul and rewarding for teaching and scholarship. But it would seem that we often forget this, even as we celebrate literary or historical or otherwise comfortably distant triumphs of communal achievement. A surprising number of us prefer to write about abstract "community" from the private comfort of our basements—or our unshared offices.

2. **Decenter your academic identity—or (even better) make room for a bigger one.** Transdisciplinarity emphasizes the issue studied over the name of the department on your graduate diploma. Be transdisciplinary. Bring your field's knowledge and insights to the table, not its shibboleths and border guards. Resist the temptation to cobble together a program comprised of a core course from this department and then another one from somewhere else. Create them together (see 1) and blend your knowledge and experiences together to tackle a common problem. It takes work, but the result will be all the richer for it. Build your responses with all the varied tools at your disposal. If you don't have someone on your team whose skills would be helpful in thinking about a problem, seek them out! Your students will see what you do in class and in your own research, and translate that into their own studies and work.

3. **Value place and local community, no matter where or what that is.** From cornfields to corner bodegas, humans are everywhere … and so are their stories. There are stories your students will want to tell and problems they will want to work on. Instead of seeing what's next door as just one more part of flyover country or one more cookie-cutter development, be curious about your neighbors and neighborhoods. In a country and world where we live inside our cars and social media feeds, this is harder than it seems. Getting out of a classroom to learn and to help in your community is a radical act.

4. **Make room at the table for everyone.** Phrases like "common good," "the human condition," or "making a difference" land differently at the moment than "DEI" or "social justice." And in a program where we are saying that *all* our neighborhoods have value, communicating across political and social fractures is important. The ends of all these are similar, but—whatever the reasons may be—some phrases from academics elicit knee-jerk reactions and shut down conversations with our students and with the public before they have a chance to start. We have been careful to think about this, walking a tightrope between unintended alienation and self-censorship.

5. **Look to the past and the future, at the same time.** As we worked on publicity materials for the program, we came up with signage that was equal parts old-timey federalist:

Publick and Applied Liberal Arts

and a NASA-inspired acronym

PALA

much to the delight of our council. The combination of ye olde lettering with space-aged sans serif was a nod to the rich traditions of universities of the past—before departments and silos, when scientists were natural philosophers, and scholars could be curious about anything—that fueled the Renaissance and the Enlightenment while also turning toward the possibilities of the new and unimagined. Their incongruity also encapsulates our values of bringing the different together to imagine new ways of thinking and doing. There is a richness to an endeavor that can juggle both the past and the future with intention. Let us train our students to shoot for the moon even as they're chastened by the democracy of the dead. "Move fast and break things" is far less than half of the story, as every humanist knows. So also, however, is a dogged resistance to anything new.

6. **Don't assign term papers.** But assign everything else. Good writing is too important to entomb in a format beloved by professors and nobody else. Jettisoning the traditional research paper might throw some of us into a panic. But in the spirit of number five above, keep the baby and lose the bathwater. Books, articles, interviews, research, analysis, and writing remain intact. What changes is the final product. Instead of the term paper, assign public-facing work: blogs, exhibitions, films, podcasts, and white papers. Demand products that matter, that emphasize and invite the community in, and that invite dialogue. This is not a revolutionary idea, of course; our

teaching and learning communities have pointed this way for decades. What is new is saying the quiet part out loud to some of our colleagues—nobody reads student papers, including many of their professors, and they will never have to write such a thing again unless they become professors—while proclaiming the value of careful, persuasive writing, and our approach to the humanist's craft.

7. **Make the humanities concrete.** Show the campus and the community around you what the humanities can *do.* Bring your humanities skills to a shared table. Host, as one of our colleagues did for one of her classes, an LGBTQ+ fair that gathers welcoming businesses and associations together in one space. Partner with veterans and refugees to teach what they know about hurt, loss, and resilience in art, music, and podcasts. Show up, with the public TV station, in the town down the road devastated by flooding and tell the world a remarkable story about a community knitting themselves together in the wreckage of the early pandemic and a long-neglected dam.[9] The humanities belong out in the world.

8. **Embrace business and industry on campus and elsewhere.** And the not-for-profit groups as well. They are all part of our communities and help to shape us all. Our abilities to see the shades of grey and complexities around us are valuable everywhere. While it is tempting to code working for a non-profit as a morally superior choice—even if you make a very large salary—most of our students will find a career in for-profit enterprises of varying sizes. So let's resist that temptation, and recognize the value of morally important choices and initiatives in sectors that don't look much like the cozily isolated non-profit world in which most of us work. On a more practical level, this is where our students will get internships, and with any luck, a career.

For what it's worth, this is what we've learned so far. But manifestos are, well, manifestos. They tend to be written before the thing is done. What's more, we share with the Socrates of the *Phaedrus* a certain skepticism—let's call it humility—about writing, and giving advice, to people we've never met.[10] How can we really help if we don't know the shape of your soul, or what your community looks like, or how your academic senate does its work? "Other cases presenting different allegations and different records," as Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson has put it in a somewhat different context, "may lead to different conclusions."[11] So, take our words with a grain of salt. Still, we have learned along the way a little—or maybe a lot—about talking to our colleagues (some of them poets) and community about moving beyond departments and classrooms toward a new vision of what the humanities can—and should—do and be.

N. Christine Brookes is professor of French in the Department of History, World Languages, and Cultures and assistant dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Central Michigan University.

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[9] Here, we are citing projects that have happened on our campus since 2021. The first was the hard work of students in our spring 2023 Women and Gender Studies' capstone course led by Dr. JoEllen DeLucia, one of our PALA council members. The second is a project spearheaded by one of the authors, Dr. N. Christine Brookes with students in a course called "War and Peace" in the fall 2023 for a collaborative project titled *War Stories.* The documentary, *Sanford Voices Project* (2021), was a collaboration between Dr. Richard Rothaus (dean of our college) and Adam Miedema, a videographer at WCMU, our local PBS station (Rothaus and Miedema 2021).

[10] Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d–278b 1997, 52–4. (This should be fine since we only allude to the passage but if modern publication/translation details are needed.)

[11] Twitter, Inc. v. Taamneh et al. 2023.

Gregory Smith is associate professor of history in the department of History, World Languages, and Cultures and director of academic initiatives in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Central Michigan University.

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