

Chapter 13

Cause of a Crisis: How the Mission of Modern Higher Education Providers Place the Humanities at the Margins

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ABSTRACT

From the 1990s until the present, there has been a growing movement in the higher education sector worldwide, emphasizing the primacy of the natural sciences and commercial activity as an important part of 21st century education and workforce preparation. Since then, the ongoing discourse on higher education has also systematically led to the marginalization of humanities. This chapter explores the ways in which the statements of purpose of higher education institutions, and their subsequent activities, might contribute toward the current state of the humanities. The author argues that the self-perception of these entities is related to their organizational identity, values, and actions. Using discourse analysis, this work will also attempt to explore the mission statements of 15 major higher education institutions in Trinidad and Tobago, and how statements regarding their core work are related to the current crisis with the humanities. From this preliminary study, higher education providers may be able to reconsider the ways in which their core internal and market-driven activities might severely compromise their ability to adequately serve students and the wider society by extension.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural critics the world over have attempted to assert the value of the humanities in light of the corporatisation of higher education. This involves a general fixation on the economic benefits derived from tertiary level study, as it primarily emphasises higher education as a means towards employment, especially through career paths which are not directly connected with humanities-based subjects (Chaudhary 2016).

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Intellectuals such as Stephen Metcalf (2017) have cited the rise of neoliberalist thought within the 20th century as a leading cause for the prevalence of a utilitarian view of Western socio-political life today (Oirchetas Library and Research Service 2014, p. 3).

Following the line of reasoning which accompanies the neoliberal organisation of the human experience, the author argues that if the academy is seen internally and externally as a transactional marketplace rather than a critical space for engagement, institutions of higher learning suffer, in addition to students, and by extension the wider societies in which these students must operate.

BACKGROUND

From the 1990s until the present, there has been a growing movement in the higher education sector worldwide, emphasising the primacy of the intellectual tradition of the natural sciences, and in particular STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics); these subjects, along with other areas of study outside the humanities, are often considered to be an important part of 21st-century education and workforce development (Breiner et. al 2012, p. 3-4; Levin 2013). While being rooted in the US educational scholarship in the 1980s with its focus on enterprise and STEM subjects, the current-day discourse on the higher education has marginalised disciplines drawn from the intellectual tradition of the humanities. Several industry news reports and critical studies worldwide have observed an ongoing international trend of significant enrolment declines, decreased budgetary allocations, department consolidations, and even faculty closures for humanities-based courses and programmes of study at a number of higher education institutions across Europe, Africa, Asia, North and Latin America (Bothwell 2018; Delany 2013; Dutt-Ballerstadt 2019; Six 2018; Flaherty 2016; Flaherty 2018; Grove 2015; Hale 2014; Jenvey 2016; Kapcia and Newson 2014; Maslen 2010; Macfarlane 2011; Preston 2015; Schmidt 2018; Stover 2018; Tierney 2018; Zaretsky 2016).

While there have been attempts to include the humanities in subject groupings from other intellectual traditions through the arts (Breiner et al 2012, pp.4-5; Guyotte et al 2015, pp. 30-31), by and large, business-related, and science-based subjects have dominated academic and public discourse regarding their key role in advancing both leading and developing nations. Some scholars have commented on how the natural sciences, and business acumen has been entrenched in popular Western imagination as the assumed standard for valid knowledge, intelligence and ‘success’ (Hwang & Taylor 2016, pp. 39-40, 44; Kagan 2009, p. 226).

This chapter will further explore perspectives regarding the current state of humanities within higher education and popular Western discourse, the ways in which the mission of higher education institutions today contribute toward the current state of the humanities, and the implications of this occurrence for students and the wider societies in which these institutions operate.

Complexity of Higher Education Institutions

The nature and work of higher education institutions position them to be key agents in positive societal change. However, while an emphasis on their primary work of internally supporting teaching and learning is of necessity, it is also argued that it should not be done at the expense of wider social engagement.

Mintz (2019) notes that colleges and universities today vastly differ from those of the 19th century. This is in part due to the multiple purposes and objectives which shape their priorities, and as a result,

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