Forum

Hybrid Humanities at Polytechnic Universities

To the Editor:

I'm grateful to Wai Chee Dimock for calling our attention to several excellent initiatives that bridge the humanities, STEM, and design in her editor's column "Humanists as Builders" (vol. 133, no. 3, May 2018, pp. 473–81). I'd like to add one more category to her list of institutions that are building "hybrid humanities" (477): technological and polytechnic colleges and universities. Stressing tangible technical and professional skills, these institutions were devoted to STEM before it was fashionable. However, they rarely attract large numbers of humanities majors, and so they are often overlooked in "state of the humanities" conversations. Nevertheless, they provide exciting opportunities for new collaborations between humanists, engineers, designers, and the general public.

To take my own campus as an example, Lawrence Technological University (LTU) has been traditionally associated with its strong programs in engineering and architecture. But in recent years, humanists at LTU have been taking a more active role by bringing literary, philosophical, and historical analyses to these and related fields. For instance, our Grand Challenge Scholars Program will give majors in arts and science, as well as in engineering, the chance to develop senior projects on critical topics such as energy, health care, and information technology, leading to a certificate from the National Academy of Engineering. The recently launched lecture series Humanity + Technology brings prominent humanities scholars to campus to interpret, analyze, and historicize technological issues. And students who major in our forthcoming degree program Technological Humanities will study traditional humanities topics while also pursuing a variety of technological skills, from coding to design thinking. LTU is not alone in these endeavors; initiatives such as these are being developed at similar institutions across the country.

By embracing the new collaborations that technological institutions provide, humanists have the opportunity to expand our reach to fields—and to student populations—that we might have otherwise missed. Cultivating humanistic approaches in technological students is, after all, another form of building.

Paul Jaussen
Lawrence Technological University

Reply:

I thank Paul Jaussen for bringing to our attention the exciting initiatives at LTU and other polytechnic and technological colleges and universities. These institutions, dedicated to tangible skills and measurable outcomes, serve a student population very different from the one most humanities scholars serve and provide a window on the future of the profession all the more suggestive for being unfamiliar. What kind of audience can we aspire to, and what kind of audience can we realistically expect? Are students at LTU within our reach? And if the answer is "no" for many of us, are we reconciled to that verdict, or is there a sense that things could be otherwise? The "hybrid humanities" initiatives at LTU suggest that a discipline compelled by necessity to engage other fields of knowledge might yield forms of access to a broader spectrum of students. Building these hybrid forms could be one of the most urgent tasks ahead.

Wai Chee Dimock
Yale University