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# Remaking the humanities: Neoliberal logics, wicked problems, and survival post-covid

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**ABSTRACT**

The "market value" of the Humanities in most of academia is, once again, in crisis, but this time it is decidedly more actual than perceived thanks to the international financial collapse of 2008 and more recently to the economic repercussions of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Despite the resistance many of us in the Humanities might feel characterizing our work in terms of "market value," I argue that these days we must more explicitly embrace, rather than resist, such neoliberal logics as a way to revise and reframe our teaching and scholarship for the evolving landscape of higher education. More specifically, I propose that we should reform our work in relation to the interdisciplinary constructs of "wicked problems" and "design thinking," and that we should do so as a way to cultivate within our students visible production-oriented skill sets for working with local and global stakeholders across corporate contexts, government workplaces, legal and educational settings, and civic organizations. In doing so, I challenge academics' longstanding assumptions about the inherent and self-evident worth of studies in writing, literature, philosophy, history, and other liberal arts. Drawing on current instantiations of applied learning in rhetorical education as an extended case study, I provide concrete examples to describe, illustrate, and suggest policy and practice implications for reforming the Humanities more radically than the incremental adjustments and re-branding gestures that are currently underway in the US and beyond.

Keywords: Humanities, neoliberalism, wicked problems, design thinking, applied learning.
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## 1. Introduction

The economic and existential "crisis of the Humanities," already looming in the years just prior to Covid-19, is now fully in bloom thanks to the pandemic and the fiscal austerity measures undertaken by many universities and colleges in response. The vast majority of signs continue to point to the ever-decreasing "market value" of the Humanities in higher education, a decline exacerbated by the second major wave of global financial precarity in just over a decade, a wave that has only accelerated the social and economic forces of neoliberalism as a structuring logic for education. This is a logic that might best

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be described, following rhetorician Sharon Cowley's (2006) use of the term, as an *ideologic*, a shared rationality embodied in material practice by a multiplicity of participants within a social matrix. In the case of college, for students seeking an education and for administrators managing its delivery, neoliberalism is rapidly becoming the logical premise upon which rational decisions are made--by the students, about which classes to take or disciplines to major in; and by the administration, about which classes to offer or departments to downsize, merge, or eliminate altogether.

This is of course not new; neoliberalism dates comfortably to the political economic era dominated by Reaganomics in the US and Thatcherism in the UK. What is new--or more recent at least--is the degree of societal saturation that has moved it from a paradigm-shifting ideology to the status quo itself, including within colleges and universities. To be sure, neoliberalism has its detractors, quite notably among a *third* category of stakeholders in higher education--the *faculty* in the Humanities. By now most of us subscribe to a fairly common (and generally critical) understanding of neoliberalism, one summarized effectively by Wendy Brown (2011), who defines it as

> a governing social and political rationality that submits all human activities, values, institutions, and practices to market principles. It formulates everything in terms of capital investment and appreciation (including and especially humans themselves), whether a teenager building a resume for college, a twenty-something seeking a mate, a working mother returning to school, or a corporation buying carbon offsets. As a governing rationality, neoliberalism extends from the management of the state itself to the soul of the subject; it renders health, education, transportation, nature, and art into individual consumer goods, and converts patients, students, drivers, athletes, and museum-goers alike into entrepreneurs of their own needs and desires who consume or invest in these goods. (118)

Despite such critical descriptions of neoliberalism and the corporatization of higher education, both are now paradigmatic forces that cannot be dismissed or wished away. Many in the Humanities have of course tried, as is evident from the last decade's steady spate of books, journal articles, and popular press op-eds and features with varied iterations of the phrase "crisis of the Humanities" in their titles (Ahlburg 2018; Fish 2010; Frassinelli 2019; Zhang 2011).

Not only have those arguments failed to prevent the neoliberalist onslaught, but as happened with the global financial collapse of 2008, the economic fallout from Covid-19 is clearly being embraced as a moment of opportunism, of the sort that neoliberalism's Godfather, Milton Friedman (1982), famously theorized as being valuable for changing systems of public good into private enterprise--what Naomi Klein (2007) would later call "disaster capitalism." As William Pannapaker (2021) has recently written, observing such opportunism, "For administrators, then, the question is: What cost savings and compromises now seem possible that were unthinkable before the pandemic?" (49) The cost savings, to be sure, come regularly in the form of reduced hiring lines and operating budgets for the Humanities; moreover, even though the Biden administration's signature spending agenda for the Covid era provides for improvements in higher education in the US, the majority of them come in the form of research and development funding in the sciences and in STEM research centers, all in line with satisfying expressed needs of industry in a capitalist framework. Indeed, even investments designed to increase minority enrollments use STEM funding as their primary vehicle (Burke, L, 2021).

What we are seeing now, then, is an opportunistic amplification of an architectonic neoliberal structure for how the Humanities are framed, contained, and sidelined, one that is increasingly not only that much harder to argue against but one posited as a necessary and inevitable response to a post-2008, post-Covid world. The criticisms against neoliberalism and its reordering of the academy have been broad based and deeply integrated into most of what we do in the Humanities, as is evident from most of the sources referenced above and from more extended arguments made by such scholars as David B. Downing (2017), Martha Nussbaum (2010), and Henry Giroux (2014). Yet because such scholarship is inevitably both a product and producer of an ideology that is oppositional to neoliberalism, there is little productive dialogic engagement with that "other side"--the side that is clearly winning. A research gap exists, then, in the sense that many of us in the Humanities simply do not accept the premise upon which negotiation, compromise, and in the end practical agency might be found. My argument, therefore, as distressing as it will be for many readers, is to take a different tack and argue in line with neoliberal ideologies for a more accommodationist identity, not just as an exercise in branding but in an actual reform of our work and function.

I can only imagine that many readers will already be shaking their heads in disagreement, especially those influenced by scholars such as Christopher Breu (2018), who writes vehemently against any attempts to appease the managerial rhetorics of neoliberalism and insists instead on a "workerist militancy" to combat the economic forces in play. Yet I want to argue, for the sake of survival if nothing else, that our *raison d'être* must have immediately recognizable market value that will indeed appeal to students and administrators in what is now routinely characterized as the "corporate university." As Brown (2011) observes, vague claims of "critical thinking" will no longer suffice in convincing stakeholders of our worth (124). What might suffice in terms of market valuation are metrics measuring a rise in student semester hours and majors within our constellation--*investments*, in other words, made by students as consumers of the products and services we are offering. In the remainder of this essay, I wish to sketch one possible proposal for increasing our visible market value, not just to students as stakeholders but also to college administrators paying attention to what those students consume and, to be sure, external stakeholders who reward market choices with job recruitments, funding opportunities, and public recognition. My proposal is to reform our educative policies and practices in ways that resituate the Humanities as a locus for understanding and learning how to work effectively on "wicked problems," for engaging students routinely in design thinking and applied learning, and for cultivating cognitive and practical skill sets that more clearly rationalize our value in the higher education marketplace.

The very discourse in which I write the immediately preceding paragraph is, to be sure, the discourse of neoliberalism; I employ it both intentionally and with a considerable degree of self-aware unease. Nevertheless, as I hope to demonstrate, it is a discourse that we cannot avoid in the Humanities, and an (uneasy) embrace of it might, ironically enough, aid in our salvation from what is surely the endgame of neoliberalism for traditional conceptions of the Humanities--namely our relegation to a tiny, underfunded corner of higher education, one seen as a vertiginous holdover from an earlier epoch but still valued as a minimally supported supplement to the real work and purpose of a college degree. (Some in the Humanities may perhaps already see themselves there.) My desire is not that we "sell out" or be swallowed whole by neoliberalism as an ideologic; it is, rather, that a kind of *transculturation* might be made possible when those of us in the Humanities, equipped with our own critical discourses and ideologics, embrace and dialogically interact with (rather than dismiss and resist) the operations of higher education as a marketplace, one in which our continued existence depends on the products we offer.

## 2. Methodology and organization of essay

While this article is an essay and not an empirical study, I nevertheless explicate statistical data and reporting from across fields of academia and journalism. I employ rhetorical analyses of situated practices and case studies, and I offer extended examples and testimonies from within higher education to make a general argument and provide a particular solution. I begin below by reviewing literature on the shrinking value of the Humanities. While this is a global challenge faced by academics in the UK, Australia, Canada, and beyond, I nevertheless draw from research data primarily about public and private universities and colleges in the United States. Thus, this is a necessarily impartial sketch of higher education, but it is one that offers a representative case study that most readers within a neoliberalized global context will be able to recognize as familiar. I then supplement this sketch by also describing and referencing a small handful of common institutional responses to the present crisis, my own's included. Following that, I argue such responses are piecemeal at best, and I attempt to make the case for more substantively and more effectively reconfiguring the Humanities as a constellation of inter- and intra-disciplinary practices that collectively shift our work's historical center of gravity toward the cultivation of production-oriented creative and critical skill sets that can prepare students more directly and explicitly for professional life and civic engagement. In that process, I integrate the concept of the wicked problem as a way to ground both our current context and this proposed response to it. Finally, I conclude by offering a few concrete examples of possibilities from the (inter)disciplinary foundation that most directly informs this essay--namely my own field of Composition and Rhetoric, housed as it often is within English departments in the US but applicable and analogous as it is to much of the work that goes on

within college level Humanities programs. In doing so, I suggest implications for changes to policies and practices in Humanities research, teaching, and administration.

## 3. Literature review: The shrinking value of the humanities

Writing not long before the arrival of Covid-19, Benjamin Schmidt (2018) was arguing in *The Atlantic* that the collapse of the global economy in 2008 produced a notable sea change in students' perceptions about their career prospects, one that has resulted in serious declines in Humanities majors, declines characterized by the well-worn phrase "crisis in the Humanities." Such a descriptor is certainly not new. We've been claiming said crises for over 50 years. This one observed by Schmidt, though, from 2008 on, has been more *statistically* real than many of the prior crises, in part because the latter were often projections that were not fully met by any actual declines in majors (save for the academic-bust years of the late 1970s to the mid-1980s). Since then, the number of Humanities majors had in fact been relatively stable despite the regularity of disconcerting projections. After the economic crash of 2008, however, the numbers have indeed been telling a different story. As Schmidt writes,

> History is down about 45 percent from its 2007 peak, while the number of English majors has fallen by nearly half since the late 1990s. Student majors have dropped, rapidly, at a variety of types of institutions. Declines have hit almost every field in the humanities, they have not stabilized with the economic recovery, and they appear to reflect a new set of student priorities, which are being formed even before they see the inside of a college classroom.

Schmidt's ultimate argument is that this decline is a product primarily of *perception*. Indeed, data from the professions show that Humanities majors are in reality gainfully employed and tend to make fairly good livings (Jaschik 2018). As Jon Marcus (2018) has written, "Employers continue to plead for college graduates to learn such things as communication and problem-solving skills that can come from studying the liberal arts. Surveys show that liberal arts majors lead satisfied lives, and earn salaries that may not be as high as majors in the sciences, but are not too far behind." Yet as Pannapaker (2021) observes in line with Schmidt, "Enrollments in humanities courses are declining nearly everywhere [because parents] and students think we have little to offer for career preparation, which has become the primary reason to attend college" (49). And to be sure, dwindling enrollments in the Humanities are not tied to dwindling enrollments overall; instead, the balance of majors in the academic marketplace is clearly shifting toward STEM fields, as charted by Missouri State University's former President, Michael T. Nietzel (2019). Reporting on data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Nietzel observes that in the decade between academic years 2005-2006 and 2015-2016, baccalaureate degrees in health professions more than doubled; parks, recreation and fitness studies doubled its graduates; studies in communications technologies saw an increase in graduates as high as 73%; and engineering, mathematics and statistics, biological and biomedical sciences, and agriculture and natural resources each grew by more than 50%.

As such reporting shows, students are clearly seeking degrees that will grant them more direct marketable skill sets or credentials that will land them jobs. One interesting bit of evidence referenced by Schmitdt (2018) for the desire for marketable skills as a primary outcome of a college degree program is that there are only two categorical models of higher education where Humanities majors are not declining, where they are about the same as they were in 2008: one is historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), where, according to Dennis Ahlburg (2018), students remain committed to developing a life philosophy as a degree outcome; the other is military academies--such as West Point, Colorado Springs, and Annapolis--in which students routinely have free tuition and a guaranteed job post-graduation. Students outside of those contexts do not necessarily feel secure in setting as a primary goal the cultivation of a life philosophy.

One might also add that this sea change, marked by such concerns about economic safety, is an inevitable consequence of neoliberalism's impact on the middle class and the steady rise of financial precarity overall, regardless of 2008. A college degree that did not lead directly into the labor market was less concerning decades ago when reasonable-paying jobs were more widely available to those without degrees and when tuition costs' returns on investment (their ROI, in neoliberal-speak) was not so disproportionate. As the US has debated the very concept of a living wage (as if that were something debatable), it has at the same time been steadily decreasing public investments into education so that

rising tuition costs continue to outpace wage and salary increases; hence our students' increased need to keep in mind their ROI as they decide what majors to select and which career paths to pursue.

These observations are echoed by Enrollment Intelligence Now co-Founder Bill Conley (2019), who writes that "students have been inexorably marching away from the traditional liberal-arts majors" and that he does not "see these trends changing, especially when coupled with stagnating income and the resulting pressure on a family's return-on-investment calculus." This will all of course be exacerbated by the broader, overall looming enrollment crisis tied to related economically motivated demographic changes: the crash of 2008 brought with it a direct drop in national fertility rates, the implications of which will be felt eighteen years later, when far fewer traditionally aged students exist to matriculate. This is just around the corner: 2026, the oft-touted dooms-year for academia, is projected to look like the upper edge of a cliff on charts tracking annual enrollment numbers, according to university demographics researcher Nathan Grawe (2018).

## 4. Literature review continued: Making adjustments, maintaining paradigms

*The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s recent report "The Looming Enrollment Crisis" (Kelderman and Gardner 2019) provides a multiplicity of case studies designed to show how a wide range of private and public colleges and universities are working to avoid, or at least mitigate, the metaphorical cliff referenced above. Most of their initiatives are through-and-through business-oriented gestures aimed not at any particular disciplinary sector or institutional wing but emanating instead from a birds-eye view of overall revenues and expenditures: in addition to massive investments in recruitment, the illustrative colleges and universities are developing creative ways to reconfigure costs and restructure offerings to meet the consumer demands of the students and their families. For a few simple examples, the authors describe one liberal arts college providing free summer tuition, some colleges expanding their online courses, others finding ways to accelerate degree completion through increased dual-credit and CLEP programs, and still others sharply increasing their number of degree options to capture as many students as possible. All are striving toward making their institutions more affordable and more accessible, broadly conceived.

Regardless of those initiatives, those of us in the Humanities still need to work against the larger cultural shift underway that perceives decreasing returns specifically on a liberal arts degree. It's within that framework that Schmidt (2018) suggests we undertake the work of remaking the Humanities. He writes that "their place is diminishing, changing both them and the university as whole. The decisions and rhetoric around the humanities now have especial importance, as journals, libraries, and universities have to make new sets of decisions around what shape the new humanities will take." To be sure, those decisions and that shape are both actively under construction in relevant departments, as many of us attempt to remake ourselves--albeit in mostly piecemeal ways. That final caveat, however, is part of the problem and points to the research gap identified in this essay's introduction. While many of us in the Humanities are revising our pedagogies and curricula, we often do so reluctantly and via surface-level adjustments, mostly because, I suspect, we are influenced by the critical scholarship demonstrating the destructive impacts of neoliberalism. We do not wish to contribute to the evolution of a corporate university any more than we wish to dismantle the social compact undergirding the self-evident value of a liberal arts education. We thus find ourselves struggling under the dialectical force of participating in neoliberal practices while trying to maintain the longstanding traditional values and functions of our disciplinary teaching and research. The result is an array of small changes underway, evident in a body of literature that is emerging alongside critical literature oppositional to neoliberalism. What seems yet to emerge is a lot of scholarship productively negotiating an actual dialogue contributive to more fundamental reforms in the Humanities. That will need to come eventually, and this essay is an effort to move in that direction.

As one example from the current literature of changes underway, The Association of Departments of English (The ADE) released in 2018 a comprehensive report titled "A Changing Major," which surveys a range of curricular and programmatic revisions and initiatives occurring in English Departments across the US since 2010. Many of those changes reflect efforts to integrate into degree programs varied educational experiences and pedagogical content that provide the visible cultivation of pragmatic, active skill sets, ones that have more explicit transferability into career readiness. "A Changing

Major" describes, for example, how some departments at PhD-granting institutions have developed course structures that are more directly career-oriented:

> The University of Nebraska, Lincoln, offers ENGL 300: Professional Practices for English Majors, and the department encourages students to partake of internships and other career-development activities. Likewise, the University of Georgia offers the course Careers for English Majors. The University of Iowa has even created a literary publishing track within its major. This four-course program involves units in publishing and editing and includes work in digital media. Implied in these activities is the notion of a supplemental package or module of courses that provides job-seeking acumen, internships, industry knowledge, and new-media training. For those departments interested in enhancing their career appeal, the various approaches here offer valuable models. (ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major 2018: 13)

Departments at BA- and MA-granting institutions are developing similar strategies: they are increasingly offering or facilitating internship opportunities for their majors, usually as electives; advising students on career placements (rather than just their navigation through the degree program); integrating career preparation in one- and two-credit courses (wherein students also work on resumes and LinkedIn profiles); enlisting faculty to regularly justify the professional value of the degree with updated data from the professions; and so on (ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major 2018: 13).

Many of the initiatives described by the ADE report have been discussed, attempted, and/or established in recent years within my own department of English at my state's flagship university, a Research-1 land grant institution. We have, for example, programmed departmental events designed to help our students understand their varied career options beyond teaching. At a symbolic and epistemic level, our major in English is no longer advertised as having "concentrations" but instead "pathways"--a significant re-branding metaphor for those of us who believe in the power of language to shape perception. We have grown a fairly robust elective internship program that we promote to students nearing the end of their major. And we developed a professional writing certificate as well as a course similar to that of the University of Georgia's, ours titled "Careers for English Majors and Minors." (Both initiatives were designated as "pilot" or "experimental" and have unfortunately not been sustained.)

For another example *not* described in detail in the ADE's report, there is across the US a slow rise of "Public Humanities" programs--what we might call a trend among, for instance, literature specialists (among others) attempting to re-brand their work away from solitary studies of texts for their own sake to work that has a more immediate and visible public impact, work that can be understood more readily by the general population (including parents paying for tuition) to be of practical value and concrete applicability. Students can earn formal certificates (and even full-on degree credentials) in Public Humanities programs by working at the intersections of varying disciplines and, at the same time, generating concrete real-world outcomes. Rather than writing a paper on Jane Eyre, for example, a student might now see herself developing material for a museum or for a community organization--activities that potentially function as bridges to career paths or at the very least CV enhancements. Such activities can be seen as directly serving the public rather than merely reproducing the work of scholarly specializations in isolation, an argument developed at length by Katina Rogers (2020) in her recent book on the Public Humanities trend.

My department has integrated these initiatives into our work as well, mainly at the graduate level: we have enabled our PhD students to substitute a Public Humanities project for one of their comprehensive area exams--a small revision of our prior standardized structure of traditional disciplinary examinations. In concert with that, the program has offered at least one seminar focused on Public Humanities in recent years. To point out the obvious: these are not radical revisions of our basic, historically sedimented curriculum; they are supplemental initiatives that give our students a bit more choice and a taste of potential pragmatic applications of their growing academic knowledge base (and of course a line on an emergent CV). A more structurally comprehensive example of this specific work can be found in The University of Arizona's relatively new BA in Public and Applied Humanities (PAH), a transdisciplinary educational program combining field-specific professional skills with the cognitive, creative, interpersonal, and intercultural skills provided by humanistic perspectives. The specific fields the program engages in-depth include fashion, business administration, game studies, spatial organization and design thinking, rural leadership and renewal, and public health (Department of Public and Applied Humanities 2021). A careful review of the PAH curriculum reveals that students' critical,

theoretical, scholarly work in the Humanities is consistently put into practice with the collaborative construction of publicly facing projects and varied career-oriented experiences, the latter of which are integrated directly and explicitly within contexts of entrepreneurship and relevant industries, an integration that requires and exceeds PAH's *required* (rather than *elective*) internship credits.

Unfortunately, the in-depth integration of career preparation and academic work of the PAH degree is not representative of more typical conceptual and structural adjustments advanced by most of us in the Humanities. Indeed, in a week-long summer program for department leaders within the Modern Languages Association (the MLA) that I attended not long ago in Atlanta, Georgia, almost all of the sessions, for days on end, were devoted to the work of making market-motivated adjustments to what we do and how we do it, adjustments often coupled with rebranding efforts. Twenty years ago, prior to the Great Recession, when Marxism was still fashionable (before the culture wars shifted so deeply from class to cultural identity), the very term "rebranding" would have been highly suspect. The same can be said of the language of "skill sets," a phrase suggestive of selling out and serving the corporate world at the expense of one's enlightened soul and the "true" work of the humanities. How quaint that all now seems, as we quite readily embrace discourses of rebranding in whatever ways we can in order to get those students back into our classrooms.

Such rebranding is not just occurring in organizations like the MLA and its leadership workshops. Consider the following marketing-centric language from The National Endowment for the Humanities in a recent publication titled "Promising Practices in Humanities PhD Professional Development," wherein they offer faculty and administrators ways of expanding traditional perceptions of the PhD beyond the historical model of academic self-reproduction. In the midst of their report, they provide a table of alternative expressions in common discourses surrounding PhD work. One of the table's columns (titled "Instead of…") lists standardized terms and phrases, and an accompanying column (titled "You could talk about…") suggests alternatives for each. For example, the table suggests that *instead of* "the profession" or "the job market" *you could talk about* "professional careers" or "job markets," plural. *Instead of* "Plan B" or "Backup Options," *you could talk about* "Career diversity"; "Career horizons/pathways"; and/or "Versatile humanists"; among others (McCarthy 2017: 8).

While much of the reconfiguring in/of the Humanities in academia has targeted the undergraduate level (as that is our primary consumer base), the example from NEH (along with a few other examples referenced above) is focused at the PhD level, wherein Humanities departments nationwide are also struggling to make more visible their market value. What is at work in the table described above are two rhetorical motives: one is *marketing*, selling the potential capaciousness of the degree and expanding awareness of its applicability beyond a professorial career on the tenure track; the other is *reforming*--not just perceptions but also conceptions, reflecting and directing through discursive construction new ways of doing Humanities education, even at the doctoral level. Still, those "new ways" are, as I've repeatedly used the term above, "adjustments." Indeed, the NEH's suggested discursive alternatives barely rise to the level of "tinkering." In the end, much of the work described thus far does not attempt to fundamentally remake the Humanities. Most are *additions* to historical practice, curricular *modifications*, and/or institutional *initiatives* or *alternatives* that are ultimately designed to maintain our foundational work mostly in the shape as it has long been but to now make it--in consumerist parlance-- "value added." In this respect, adjustments are in and of themselves a marketing gesture, a rebranding effort functioning via surface-level changes. Speaking very generally, our traditional paradigm remains firmly in place, despite piecemeal, incremental, and/or surface revisions being brought to what we do and how we talk about it.

This is evident even in the "Alt-Ac" movement, which has become a buzz-term in doctoral programs over this past decade, often employed to reference rather casually the need to explore and present to PhD students alternatives to academic careers. Recent published scholarship on Alt-Ac (Katopodis and Davidson 2019; Kelly et al 2020; Rogers 2020) has tended to define the phrase more carefully as indicating career paths that are *within* academia but are alternatives to the traditional "gold standard" tenure track position (eg: advising students; grant writing; developing educational materials; administering programmatic assessment; etc). Notably such an emphasis reinforces just how all-consuming academia is as an educational outcome in our current paradigm, so much that formalized alternatives to the tenure track are still bound to it, relegated to support systems and adjacent structural

practices. The very syntax of the term itself implies a center and a margin, a norm and its binary other. (It's also a slippery term, as it can be used to euphemize adjunct teaching positions, those often exploitative per-course lecturer positions that are technically "Alt-Ac" jobs.) A label that would align more squarely with the ratio of careers potentially available to those with PhDs might somehow reverse the "Alt" and the "Ac" so that the latter is the exception rather than the rule, the margin rather than the center. To imagine a PhD program that did so would be to imagine a program in which skills for careers in government, business, nonprofit agencies, and contexts beyond would be actively taught and possibly integrated with internships, apprenticeships, and other real-world experiences. This would require different expertise on behalf of many faculty, which has significant implications for hiring practices, since faculty with developed skills and experiences from actually alternative contexts would need to be integrated into already-shrinking departments.

The sad reality is that most graduate programs in the Humanities still teach primarily disciplinary scholarship as an end unto itself--sometimes providing college level teaching courses as a way to give candidates "practical skills" for their post-graduate career (singular form intended). We are mostly just shifting our discourses, making adjustments, and trying to slow the exodus. What we are *not* doing is fundamentally remaking ourselves or our work. To return to my own department's previously mentioned example: providing one Public Humanities project as an optional substitution for one third of our traditional area exam process is not a game changing gesture; neither is holding a workshop here and there on Alt-Ac career options to help our graduate students imagine alternatives (still inside the academy no less!) to the professorship.

My desire here for something more substantive in both undergraduate and graduate education in the Humanities is a response to economic pressures that are not solely on our students and their ROI calculations; the pressures are of course directly on us as well. Many of us--especially in land-grant institutions--rely on legislative budgets that continue to shrink, those dwindling amounts constrained even further under funding formula matrices comprised of categories with titles like Student Semester Hours, Graduation Completion Rates, and Numbers of Majors. As we lose students, we lose money. And we lose permanent faculty. It's not just Humanities *majors* in decline: it's Humanities *professors* as well. Traditional Humanities departments (eg: History, English, Philosophy) around the country are shrinking in permanent personnel and, as a result, being merged with other ailing entities, or in some cases, being cut entirely. Some readers in the US may remember the debacle that unfolded at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, which proposed in 2018 the elimination of thirteen mostly-liberal-arts programs, later reaching a compromise of cutting "only" six, and eventually, a year later, relenting altogether under intense public scrutiny. They relented, in the end, because they were able to recover lost financial ground through faculty attrition (Nguyen 2019). But that was pre-Covid; for a more recent example, consider that in early 2022, the University of Kansas announced that it "will discontinue its Humanities department, along with degrees in Visual Art Education and Humanities [. . .]. The changes come as the public universities in Kansas grapple with budget problems caused by cornavirus-related expenses, reduced state aid and declining enrollment" (Associated Press 2022).

It is thus in the interests of self-preservation that we are all wanting to reinvent ourselves, to make ourselves more unabashedly marketable to students, to even advertise the value of our work in considerably neoliberal terms. We are acting on multiple fronts--curriculum, pedagogy, programming, recruitment--to stem the STEM migration. And yet, our essential function is not so much changing as it is being modified, as we remain so ensconced in a prestige economy of scholarly (re)production and abstract soft-skills cultivation (like "critical thinking" and "deep reading") that we are not addressing the ways in which external stakeholders' perceptions do not align with our allegedly deeper self-understandings. This is the surest sign of encroaching obsolescence: we cannot keep making relatively minor adjustments to an otherwise continuance model and advertising ourselves as relevant without making deeper structural, paradigmatic changes. Otherwise, we are behaving much like MySpace in the age of Facebook, or Blockbuster in the age of Netflix. (Yes, those are consumerist business analogies, intentionally so.)

## 5. A proposal: Wicked problems, shifting paradigms

The rather pessimistic characterization that concludes the previous section leads me to a proposal, one that comes out of my own orientation as a Composition and Rhetoric specialist. My field, often abbreviated as "Comp/Rhet," is one that has always been (for decades long before it was finally fashionable) deeply invested in skill sets, in real-world applications and public outcomes, in students' professional preparation as well as their personal, political, and social development. Over thirty years ago, a significant segment of Comp/Rhet was studying and teaching professional communication to the extent that an entire subdiscipline emerged--namely Professional Writing studies, sometimes conflated with or complemented by Technical Writing studies. Around the same time, but slower in its emergence as a subdiscipline, "Computers and Writing" became an organizing force for many of us. These areas have thrived--and are in fact expanding in many institutions rather than shrinking right now--because of their inherent connections to worlds of work and public engagement. The ADE Report from 2018 referenced in the section above provides comparative data from 2010 to 2016, which shows that while Literature track enrollments in English departments have been trending either "lower" or "sharply lower" in about 74% of institutions surveyed (with 26% remaining steady but with zero growth in a single institution), tracks in Professional Writing studies in English departments have either remained stable or seen *growth* in 77% of institutions--a near mirror opposite in enrollment trends ("A Changing Major" 2018).

From that vantage point--as someone credentialed in Comp/Rhet, in pedagogies of the practical, the professional, and the public--I argue that a productive path for the Humanities to take now is one that more comprehensively resituates our educational aims within 21st century professional and public contexts, reconfiguring in the process our curricula in such ways as to make conceptual and practical skill sets central to the enterprise rather than peripheral. This does not mean abandoning critical theory or disciplinary content, nor does it imply a slippery slope leading to vocational training. I mean to argue here for curricula (and by extension related institutional work) that are still rich in theory and disciplinary knowledge but no longer function as ends in and of themselves. Rather, they need to serve as complements to, and as partial means to, ends that are practical, applied, and production-centric in non-academic contexts. Student learning outcomes should not be measured primarily by tests and essays and other traditional means of demonstrating knowledge for its own sake: such outcomes need to be reimagined at classroom-based and programmatic levels as forms of practical work, as collaborative processes and tangible creations that mimic and/or function as desired services and products of paid work and organized civic action. This would not eliminate wholesale our traditional modus operandi, but it would be a substantive shift in our center of gravity. One might consider it a "flipped curriculum" analogous to the "flipped classroom."

There are of course a multiplicity of potential professional and public contexts that can serve as frameworks for applied student learning. For just one example, as a rhetoric teacher I'm acutely aware of the ways in which such contexts are formative for the communicative practices I teach my students: as the postmodern, social, and linguistic turns have all confirmed, all discourses are contingent upon their social and cultural contexts (Fish 1980; Bizzell 1992); they are shaped by the particulars of communicative situations comprised of audiences, constraints, and modalities (Bitzer 1968; Vatz 1973; Miller 1984); and they can and should be evaluated according to stakeholders' needs and interests (Writing Assessment 2018). The same can certainly be said of what others elsewhere in the Humanities teach: art, philosophy, and history can all be applied in practice, but whatever is ultimately created by students in and across those disciplines will need to be understood and assessed relative to professional and public needs and valuations that exist outside of school. Such contextualizing is foundational to any curriculum that looks beyond its own site of self-reproduction. This is the basic model of internships, for just one example, wherein learners are tasked with doing real work for real people in real settings beyond the classroom. In the case of internships, educational institutions often speak of their "partnerships" with businesses and organizations that host student interns. Such is the model at work in the previously referenced Public and Applied Humanities program at The University of Arizona; as the program's website declares,

> Applied Humanities students prepare for their future by gaining insight into their important career-advancing and transferable skills, contributing to partner agencies in meaningful and substantive ways, developing entrepreneurial and collaboration skills, and exploring and enhancing life in the community and beyond. The required internship and career readiness

> experiences bolster student confidence and understanding of the job market and careers that await upon graduating from the university. (Internships and Career Readiness 2021)

Certainly, internships framed as partnerships comprise a very well established and effective model for contextualizing applied learning and production-oriented outcomes. I fully endorse that kind of educational context here, in particular for the ways in which it can make visible our students' career readiness and put them onto paths that lead directly into job markets. Still, because such partnerships need to be developed out of existing businesses and organizations, locally and online, the educational framework is bound to its contemporary moment and to the participatory willingness of partners. This is a constraint to be weighed against the clearly valuable affordances of the partnership framework, as the constraint undercuts--to a degree--the notion that students are preparing for their futures, which surely hold entrepreneurial and career opportunities not yet established, imbricated as those will be within coming evolutions of our social, technological, political, and professional landscapes. It is for that reason that I wish to layer onto such models of practical, applied education what Kenneth Burke might call an additional *terministic* screen--specifically a conceptual and perceptual framework that can help us in the Humanities to imagine, discuss, and further develop curricular and pedagogical practices that are in concert with said evolutions, perhaps even at times leading rather than following them. Moreover, this is a framework that I believe has market appeal to a range of stakeholders--not just to students and their parents as our primary consumers of educational credentialing but also to legislators and institutional governing boards who decide which programs and initiatives to support within higher education. That framework is that of the "wicked problem."

Defined initially by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber of UC Berkeley in the 1970s, the wicked problem is one without a clear solution, one that cannot be identified and agreed upon by all stakeholders given their differing interests, ideologies, circumstances, and identifications. It is one that cannot be "solved" but can perhaps be made better, one that is so inherently connected to other elements of an overall ecology or system that what is ultimately needed is a collaborative approach that recognizes responses as necessarily evolving and adapting on an ongoing basis (Rittel and Webber 1972). Consider financial precarity, homelessness, hunger, and other embodiments of poverty that defy humane or rational conceptions of social order in a country as rich as the US: these are features of a particular wicked problem (wealth inequality) under capitalism. Addressing any of them demands more than just political will or a smart proposal. Responses have to consider market fundamentals alongside social compact ideologies; they must consider the ways in which any structured redistribution of wealth will come with problems of its own--ripple effects that have to be smoothed out. And the very attempts to do that will produce new issues in need of addressing, not to mention the expanding resistances that will come from many stakeholders across a wide spectrum of concerns. Another example beyond wealth inequality of a wicked problem that is similarly nebulous is climate change; I'm sure readers need no further elaboration to imagine the impossibility of finite solutions and the endless splaying out of problematic consequences from actions proposed and taken. (To be clear, for the purposes of introducing the notion of the wicked problem and applying it here in the context of a broader argument for a general Humanities readership, I am being necessarily reductive. There is a substantial body of literature critiquing, expanding, revising, and applying Rittel and Webber's concept both in and out of academia. For a recent overview, readers might wish to consult Alford and Head 2017; Lönngren and van Poeck 2021.)

It is not just social or environmental problems that are wicked, either. As John Camillus (2008, 2016) illustrates in-depth, corporations struggle with wicked problems all the time. Indeed, Camillus makes the case that corporate strategic planning is almost always itself a wicked problem, a case he exemplifies with an analysis of Wal-Mart's growth strategies in the 21st century. He writes,

> As Wal-Mart tries to grow faster, numerous stakeholders are watching nervously: employees and trade unions; shareholders, investors, and creditors; suppliers and joint venture partners; the governments of the U.S. and other nations where the retailer operates; and customers. That's not all; many nongovernmental organizations, particularly in countries where the retailer buys products, are closely monitoring it. Wal-Mart's stakeholders have different interests, and not all of them share the company's goals. Each group possesses the capacity, in varying degrees, to influence the company's choices and results. (2008: 100)

Camillus elaborates further, building a case for remarkable complexity in corporate decision making by laying out different possible growth strategies by Wal-Mart and enabling readers to imagine the ways in which each will be differently received, challenged, contradicted, and eventually transformed among that broad array of stakeholders. Responses to wicked problems have to be designed with such complexity and ongoing changes in mind. They have to be developed within material, social, economic, political, and technological contexts, understood and constructed as those are through competing positions and perspectives that will inevitably invite considerations of ideology, cultural knowledge, and even epistemological differences at foundational levels of planning and implementation. To work on wicked problems is therefore to engage in what is popularly being called *design thinking*--wherein system or ecological or network complexity is made visible and is always-already imprecise and partial, subject to evolutions and revisions that cannot be fully predicted or imagined until they have emerged.

I am certainly not the first to invoke design thinking as a construct guiding educative work. Comp/Rhet scholars, especially those in the Computers and Writing and Professional Writing sub-disciplines referenced earlier, have been examining and applying design thinking for over a decade: scholars such as Leverenz (2014), Purdy (2014), and Marback (2009) see in the relationship between design thinking and wicked problems a productive pedagogical foundation for teaching writing. Such scholars are able to build on what has long been a mantra in Comp/Rhet, namely that to teach writing is to teach not only a product but also a process, one that is messy and recursive, individual and social. They are also able to build upon thirty years of disciplinary research around the ethics and efficacy of students' real-world creative and critical compositions, sometimes as those occur in civic contexts and practices like service learning, at other times in professional contexts like internships, and of course these days in a wide range of online public contexts. (For those just now thinking through such student projects as they step into, say, Public Humanities initiatives for the first time, I would recommend a deep dive into the rich and varied research, teaching, curriculum, and pedagogy work that has sustained Comp/Rhet for decades.)

The employment of design thinking in the context of wicked problems by the above-mentioned scholars has been primarily in service of reorienting the teaching of writing to better fit current (and future) social, political, technological, and economic moments. What I am interested in here, by slight contrast, is adapting the concept more broadly for education in the Humanities overall, applying it as a pedagogic lens to help us and our students see and respond to wicked problems in professional and civic contexts--an educational function that we can make visible to the public. I want us to make the case that our students in and across the Humanities will be educated for the era of wicked problems. If they major with us, they will necessarily engage in the complexities of historiography, of ideological critique, of cross-cultural communication and collaboration, of debate and analysis, artistic production, persuasion, and empathy building. We teach ambiguity, uncertainty, and difference as a routine matter. We strive for outcomes that are not final or absolute but qualified and conditional. And we are fundamentally interdisciplinary by nature. The wicked problem is one that defies absolute closure and instead invites collective action and dialogue by multiple actors, including especially those working around the cultivation of social imaginaries, shared understandings, and the relentless negotiation of incomplete consensus. This is what we do in the Humanities, and if it can be integrated into practical, production-oriented work in public and professional contexts as described above, we may finally gain a leg up in the competitive marketplace of academic degrees.

## 6. Conclusion: Examples and implications for policy and practice

Regarding that *competitive marketplace*, and to return to my opening uneasy embrace of neoliberal logics and discourses, I want to conclude by arguing that gaining a competitive edge is not the same as selling out. I believe that a framework such as what I have proposed above--inclusive of its inherent practical pedagogical activities--has implications for policies and practices in applied learning that might put the Humanities into a more dialogical relationship with neoliberalism. This would of course not be an equal one in terms of ideological force, but it could be one of degree, what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) might characterize as a "contact zone" rife with opportunities for "transculturation." In the contexts of pedagogy and imperialism, she famously draws from ethnographic scholarship to define transculturation as a process "whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent

from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (36); moreover, while subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for" (36). In much the same way, I see opportunities for dynamic exchanges within and among the academic marketplace and the professional and public arenas that are our students' ultimate contexts for work, play, and civic engagement. If the next generation of an entering workforce and citizenry is equipped with an interwoven set of practical skills, related disciplinary theory and content knowledge, and explicit understandings of how wicked problems can be addressed through design thinking, they will not merely be cogs in late capitalist machinery. Their presence and their actions will influence their contexts, and while I do not believe that neoliberal ideologies and structures will be brought into any state of submission, they can potentially be shifted, mitigated, reshaped, and evolved in ways that many of us might find less destructive and more amenable to future interventions.

Educators in the Humanities might therefore consider advocating for curricular reforms, General Education policies, and changes to hiring practices and degree requirements that give shape and substance to the framework I've proposed here. As a way to envision such implications more concretely, I offer in this final section a few specific examples of the kinds of pedagogical work that many of us in Comp/Rhet regularly do with our students. To be clear, I see this work as too-often piecemeal, separated from more traditional teaching and learning contexts, the exception rather than the rule in many Humanities programs or Liberal Arts colleges. As I've argued throughout this essay, I see work such as this currently functioning as a value-added contribution to an overall curriculum whose center of gravity continues to be the reproduction of abstract disciplinary content. I offer brief examples only to make more concrete one possible set of practices that could be scaled up, reaffirmed within local institutional policies and assessment mechanisms, and deemed normative in a broader structural reconfiguration of the Humanities. (And to be sure, analogous examples are occurring in other fields across the Humanities as well; I draw here on my own field and experience as they are the most intimate and in-depth to me.)

Many courses in Rhet/Comp are designed to teach students how to compose in multiple modalities with(in) digital communicative spaces and platforms. Students in these courses develop competencies through concrete, real-world composing activities, often those that demand collaboration and design thinking. To make such work meaningful, students are sometimes tasked with community-oriented, public service projects, often rather messy ones tied to large social and political challenges. Group productions are a pedagogical mainstay of these classes, as are the social processes of composing and revising for different audiences and contexts. Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel (2012) describe much of this work in their book *The Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric*. They draw heavily on non-profit civic campaigns to illustrate the collaborative, multifaceted, interdisciplinary efforts that go into bringing about social change--or as I would rephrase it in light of their examples, addressing wicked problems.

One extended example the authors rely on for illustration is a grassroots initiative in the state of Michigan to revitalize the city of Detroit's beleaguered public image through "counter-programming" via coordinated social media messaging, blogs, photos, videos, and an array of other multimodal productions. This becomes the model for student work, and the authors reference and sketch in detail coursework that moves students collaboratively through real-world publicly facing "interventions," ones based on the students' personal interests, investments, lived experiences, and so on. Along the way, the students are taught not just the conceptual and pragmatic means of rhetorical production, but they also have to attend to the rhetorical ecologies within which those creations are ultimately situated. Students are required to consider--and implement actual plans for--how their media compositions will be spread (what the authors call "rhetorical velocity") and how such compositions might eventually be recomposed and repurposed by others with different perspectives and agendas. Needless to say, such projects are complicated, not just for the ways in which they challenge institutional norms and even accreditation requirements in higher education, but also for how they demand new ways of both teaching and assessing products and processes. (This essay is not the place to elaborate on those particulars; interested readers can and should consult the growing body of research on multimodal composition, assessment, and institutional oversight within the broader field of Comp/Rhet.)

Across several of my own courses at the undergraduate level, I take similar pedagogical approaches, ones in which students are taught critical theories of classical and contemporary rhetoric,

applying them to analyze circulating professional discourses, public sphere arguments, ideological positions, and constructions of identity as those exist online, in print, and in other material and performative spaces. Such analyses are only part of the work in these courses, however, serving as a prelude to practical participation in the contexts being examined. Thus, the students are inevitably tasked with also creating their own professional discourses, public arguments, ideological positions, and constructions of identity. Moreover, they are required to collaboratively learn the practical skills (usually including an array of digital tools) that are necessary for such participation beyond the classroom. I do not require that my students in these courses work on social justice projects, per se (although many do); I try just as often to enable them to participate in real-world professional contexts to which many often have access. Course outcomes routinely involve the collaborative production of websites, podcasts, marketing materials, digital posters and infographics, and videos edited and posted to sites like YouTube and Vimeo--all with rhetorical aims and all connected to the students' desired worlds of work and/or civic engagement.

Such pedagogical approaches as those described above are partial and imperfect examples of what could begin to comprise a larger curricular paradigm guiding and guided by the work that goes on across the Humanities. Artists, storytellers, historians, and philosophers have contributions to make to the broad, collaborative efforts demanded by our ever-present wicked problems of gender discrimination, spiraling health care costs, and racial injustice, among others. The Humanities could become a powerful and visible site for developing the appropriate knowledges, pragmatic skill sets, and cognitive orientations for working on wicked problems with local and global stakeholders, across corporate contexts, government workplaces, legal and educational settings, and civic organizations.

To develop such a curriculum broadly throughout the Humanities will not be easy, as it will necessitate greater collaborations across our own diverse disciplines and within an increasingly competitive academic marketplace, one in which we are structurally encouraged to compete amongst ourselves for majors and student semester hours. It will demand that we more directly discuss and debate principles and practices of pedagogy, assessment, hiring, and programmatic requirements from our differing positions and perspectives. Any reforms we undertake will produce side effects, consequences that we cannot fully predict, ripples that will themselves need to be addressed. Such an endeavor will take years, and it will never be finished. This is perhaps because it is a proposed response to our own wicked problem--that of our decreasing market value in higher education and our need to reinvent ourselves and our image. I propose this model, then, for us as much as for our students, suggesting a productive homology between our own struggles for survival and their own educational journeys. Our success is theirs, and their success is ours.

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