CHAPTER 20.

MAKING THE CASE FOR READING AND WRITING AND TEACHING AND RESEARCH

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Anne Gere became president of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 2018, after having held the presidency of the National Council of Teachers of English in 2000–01 and having been the chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1993 (we can be a bit slow at the MLA). Gere's leadership of the MLA brought into focus for that organization the often-underacknowledged ties between reading and writing, between literary study and the study of rhetoric, and, perhaps most significantly, between the teaching of writing and every other aspect of higher education.

Gere's presidential address at the 2019 MLA Annual Convention asked us to "reorient our field's vexed approaches to the relation between reading and writing, specifically the underconceptualization of reading by colleagues in writing studies and of writing by colleagues in literary studies" (452). This chapter argues, following Gere's focus during her MLA presidency on thinking outside our separate communities' categories, that public discourse—about politics, climate, race, health, education, and so many other issues—needs to be grounded in both reading and writing, in what we in the humanities teach.

Critical thinking, cultural competence, clear and concise writing, the ability to tell legitimate information from false—these are humanities skills, and they are deeply necessary to a functioning democracy. These skills are learned in the humanities classroom as part of a larger set of skills, values, and perspectives that shape humanities students' vision of the world and themselves when they graduate. The humanities, including writing studies, philosophy, language and literature, cultural studies, and more, are foundational to a liberal education. At the heart of the humanities, since ancient Athens first articulated what the liberal arts are, is the study of rhetoric, grammar, and logic.

No study of literature or culture would be possible without an understanding of rhetoric, and no understanding of rhetoric stands on its own outside an understanding of culture. Bringing together the study of reading with the

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study of writing, and learning how to use the tools gained in that study, helps students become better community members, better voters, and (and this is important to Anne Gere as well) better family members (see Gere's "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition"). Across too many states, higher education has come under fire for providing exactly the kind of education that equips students to be critical consumers of their own cultures, to be careful readers of the world around them. Starting with a warped perception of critical race theory, state legislatures, school boards, and college and university boards of governors have decided that teaching students to be "critical" is dangerous.

A confused understanding of the concept of critical race theory and a distrust of the expertise of professors, teachers, and librarians has resulted in book bans and course restrictions all over the US. History courses have received extra scrutiny when faculty members ask students to consider histories of oppression, including legacies of slavery in the US, the treatment of the country's Indigenous populations, and the Holocaust. Such scrutiny is not confined to history courses, however. Any teaching that centers on race or sexuality can be fair game in some states, and faculty members have been required to have syllabi vetted and, in some cases, to submit email histories for scrutiny. We at the MLA have recently had a member resign from a leadership position in an internal forum on race because the member worried that doing such MLA service work, focused on race and ethnicity, would put their job, in Texas, at risk.

The desire to keep universities from acknowledging race, gender, and sexuality has prompted states to pass laws forbidding public higher education institutions from having offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion and even from teaching courses that acknowledge the existence of systems of oppression in the US. Much of the hostility has been directed at history courses, but courses in literature and cultural studies and, indeed, any course that educates students about theoretical frameworks for examining their own culture have been in for the same treatment.

Attacks on teaching the humanities in the US have contained quite a few internal contradictions. The humanities have been portrayed as misleading and dangerous, causing students to question traditional values and sowing social discord. Yet at the same time, the humanities have been described as frivolous and useless, as distracting wastes of students' time. So, the humanities are dangerous and must be eliminated while at the same time are fluffy and silly time-wasters no one could take seriously.

This contradiction must be considered in relation to the center of the argument against the humanities put forward by every campus that wants to eliminate humanities departments and faculty members: humanities courses and majors

are unnecessary because they prevent students from focusing on what really matters—getting a job. The focus, in these narrow approaches, is on vocational curricula, designed to prepare students for a first job after graduation rather than for a lifetime of adapting to various jobs and careers. We in the humanities have failed to make the case that while students do want to be confident that they will be employed as soon as they graduate, they also want to understand the world around them, to study things they know they can't learn on their own, and to have skills, values, and perspectives that will help them in the third or fourth job down the line, the managerial or executive position, not just the entry-level job. Making the case for the value of humanities study is making the case for reading and writing and analysis and interpretation.

That set of skills is established first, in U.S. higher education, in the general education or core curriculum. The idea of the core curriculum is under threat these days, with attacks against the notion of liberal arts education. The model of a full liberal arts education, a general education, that wraps around a major in a specialized field has set the U.S. bachelor's degree apart from models in other countries, which, as in England, feature three years of specialized coursework in a single field. Students in U.S. universities are encouraged to experiment, required to take courses outside the major to gain a fuller understanding of the methods and matter of a range of fields. This general education, done right, supplements the specialized knowledge of the major with a broader perspective. It introduces students to fields they would have been unlikely to have encountered in secondary school (anthropology, art history, sociology, communications, less-commonly-taught languages) and allows students a freedom to switch majors that does not exist in other higher education systems.

Because of general education, students who enter college convinced they need to choose a major that correlates directly with a particular job (accounting, computer science) nevertheless are required to take courses in humanities, social sciences, physical sciences, and languages. That broad general education curriculum, shaped differently at each university, is the object of attention in many statehouses today. Legislators who see higher education as simply job preparation reject majors in the humanities, to be sure, but they also reject the assertion that coursework outside of majors in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and business fields is important at all, whether that coursework be in literature, history, art, philosophy, or writing. Anne Gere's work with writing across the curriculum and, especially, with STEM disciplines (e.g., Gere et al.), reinforces the importance of writing as essential to learning in other fields and strengthens support for general education across the board (see chapters by Ginger Shultz and colleagues as well as Mike Palmquist, this collection). Just as science students learn better by writing, so do business students learn better by

reading literature and watching films and studying how systems and structures shape both economics and culture.

In this new vocationally focused approach to higher education, epitomized recently by West Virginia University's attempt to eliminate all language instruction, its creative writing MFA program, and much more, college administrators have often failed to support liberal arts education on their campuses in the mistaken belief that abandoning the humanities, social sciences, and even basic science will enable them to give students greater odds for securing good jobs after graduation. But talking with employers would give them a different perspective on the question. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences Humanities Indicators Project (Bradburn et al.), the American Association of Colleges and Universities' employer surveys (e.g., Finley), the MLA's own research (Arteaga et al.), and many more studies indicate that employers value the skills, values, and perspectives that humanities students bring to their work. They value facility in language—English and other languages—and the ability to thrive in conditions of ambiguity. They want employees who can construct arguments and know how to communicate. They need people who can do research and evaluate and synthesize sources. Employers say they want humanities skills. Yet when they construct the algorithms that sort through the resumes on application sites, those algorithms are more likely to toss out the resumes of humanities majors than to pull them to the top of the stack. The knee-jerk privileging of majors that seem to indicate career preparation means that we in the humanities more often than not are forced to encourage our students to seed their resumes with internships and other business-coded activities so they can land that first job. Getting internships is not the problem. Failure to contextualize those internships in relation to the skills, values, and perspectives gained in humanities courses and majors is the problem. We need to be producing humanities students who understand and can articulate the value of the study of reading and writing and critical analysis for the work they will do outside of the classroom.

So the work of higher education in an anti-liberal-arts climate is to assert the use value of what the liberal arts teach at the same time as asserting its intrinsic value. Reading, writing, and critical thinking are what enable students, and voters, to see beyond the surface of propaganda, advertisements, ideology-based and emotion-based incitement. It takes work to defend the notion that the humanities teaches students to understand how to tolerate ambiguity while at the same time challenging the notion that one should teach "both sides" of the history of slavery or the Holocaust. The complex analytical tools of philosophy, literature, and rhetoric allow students to move beyond the entry-level jobs that are too often the focus of shortsighted college recruitment pitches. Humanities Indicators data show an over-representation of humanities graduates in managerial

positions (Bradburn et al. 19), but that information somehow never makes it into admissions tours.

Why do we not interrogate that over-representation? What is it about humanities education that produces great executives? It reminds me of when I was a dean and visited a network engineering firm whose recruiter told me how great humanities majors were at network engineering, once they'd had the required training course, because they knew how to ask questions, ask follow-up questions, and try different solutions until they found one that worked. Humanities grads were great network engineers, he told me, yet he never thought to actually tell university careers officers that or to ask specifically for humanities graduates when he visited campuses. We have to work harder to surface the value of the habits of mind, and not just the content, that we teach in our courses.

The study of reading and writing gives students skills and perspectives that serve them well on the job market and as participants in a democracy, and we indeed must champion the inclusion of literature, writing, and language study in general education curricula. But first- and second-year courses are not enough. Studying reading and writing and analysis and communication can't stop at the introductory and intermediate level. Just as first- and second-year language courses alone do not result in proficiency, general-education level reading and writing cannot be all that is available for students, especially students at state universities.

The threats to humanities departments and curricula since the economic meltdown of 2008–09 often take as the starting point of their arguments that the job of public colleges and universities is simply to prepare workforces for their states. If reading and writing have a place in that preparation, the argument goes, it is certainly not at an advanced coursework or graduate level—reading and writing is important only as far as necessary for getting and keeping that entry-level job. And, in states whose legislators see critical analysis as threatening, where language and literature study is portrayed as frivolous or distracting, budget-cutting takes the form of a slash-and-burn of any advanced courses (and the faculty members who teach them) that are not understood to feed directly into low-level employment in tech and business in the state. Students whose sole option for higher education is a public college or university are the ones whose access to advanced thinking, writing, and communication courses is restricted. The effect of these cuts is to restrict access to a full liberal arts education; any state resident who cannot afford a private university education must be content with a vocational track.

Attacks on the humanities as frivolous, on English degrees producing baristas, for example, have not been limited to the political right. Politicians on both sides of the aisle have called for less focus on art history or English or philosophy or gender studies and more focus on computer science or even, in Florida's case a few years ago, on welding (Jaschik; Condon). At state universities, these calls,

along with recent cuts to the humanities and even to advanced degrees in such fields as mathematics, carry with them an implied belief that public university students do not need, or are not entitled to, education that does anything but shape them into entry-level wage workers. This contempt for working-class students would deny an education that was not directly vocational (think of majors that carry a particular job in their title: accounting, engineering) to any student who could not afford to attend a private university. The refusal of access to critical and analytical education not only bends the knee of the state university to narrow economic (and often political) interests, but it also betrays a lack of understanding of the post-graduation value of education in humanities fields.

Institutions of higher education are not simply preparers of future workers. They are also sites for specialized expertise in both teaching and knowledge creation. The generation of new knowledge goes hand in hand with teaching, and the creation of tenure was designed to protect faculty members as both researchers and teachers. In the "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure" by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), we see the following:

> The purpose of this statement is to promote public understanding and support of academic freedom and tenure and agreement upon procedures to ensure them in colleges and universities. Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.
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> Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning.

Similarly, the work of Anne Gere has always combined research and teaching just as it has combined reading and writing. And that is the way forward in advancing the case for liberal arts education in the US today. The championing of teaching the humanities, social sciences, basic sciences, and mathematics—anything that is not directly vocational in approach—has to be a championing of the importance of knowledge creation side by side with teaching. Humanities expertise is specialized expertise as much as expertise in epidemiology or theoretical physics. It is deeply rooted in years of study, with shared references and a critical conversation that can be as specialized as the shared references and

conversation of the physical sciences and that is essential to moving forward our knowledge about how the world, and culture, works.

In conjunction with that work of experts talking to other experts, however, is a new focus in the humanities. What many humanists are developing now, and not a moment too soon, is the ability to bridge the gap between specialist humanities expertise and the public need for humanities expertise that make it possible to be an informed member of a shared community. Writing for each other is one thing—advancing scholarship shifts the way disciplines do their work and changes the ways we understand texts, writing habits, reading practices, language acquisition, and more. But writing for everybody else, what we now call the public humanities, is another thing entirely. It calls on us to draw on our deep expertise and use it to shift the way people think about the culture in which they live. We translate our new knowledge, we share our traditions, we invite the public in, we create new knowledge with community partners and learn from them. This, of course, is exactly the kind of translation of expertise we do in our classrooms every day. But when we do that translation in print, or at a public library, or in a book group, for readers and listeners outside the campus, we raise the stakes. We make the case for the value, for the centrality, of reading and writing in and across our communities.

From my position at the MLA, I have seen a shift in recent years in the sense of who is the audience for humanities scholarship. More and more language and literature scholars are moving toward sharing their research with wider audiences, connecting with communities outside higher education, and working with science and technology researchers on their own campuses and beyond. The MLA encourages and facilitates these kinds of expansion of what counts as humanities work, and we're really glad to see it. Writing studies, however, has been way ahead of literary studies here. Writing studies' focus on the process and product of student writing is an inherently generous approach to scholarship, one aimed at generating research results that have a large public impact. And Anne Ruggles Gere's leadership in the MLA, bringing writing studies to the forefront in the organization, has been key in helping push language and literature scholars to think about the value of our scholarship making an impact beyond our subfields.

Writing studies, in the person of Anne Gere, has brought to the MLA a focus on links to secondary school teaching; the impetus to expand the MLA International Bibliography's coverage of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies research; a new understanding of the value of writing-to-learn instruction in majors and fields; and so much more. Our expanded focus on the skills, values, and perspectives learned in language, literature, writing studies, and cultural studies allows us to assert our value in a hostile anti-humanities climate. And

our shift toward emphasis on public humanities work enables us to better make a national case for the importance of knowledge creation in reading and writing and language and culture.

Reading and writing have never been more important in our culture. We understand them together, understand that studying or researching one cannot stand without the other. The future of humanities study needs both; it needs the work so ably championed by Anne Gere, and it needs the advocacy of the organizations to which she has so generously given her service. The focus has to be a dual one—on reading and writing, but always as well on research and on teaching. That's the model Anne Gere, in her research, her teaching, and her professional leadership, has set for us. Let's live up to it.

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