

The dying arts: Oh the humanities!

By *Tristan Dewar*
STAFF WRITER

Are you, dear reader, one of the wretched who naively misplaced his or her faith in the worthiness of a sociology degree? Or are you one of the few who, out of some strange perversity, was compelled to pursue a career as a political scientist? May the heavens have mercy upon those sad-sack souls saddled with dual majors in music and theatre studies and minors in European history.

Frank Donoghue, author of "The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities," asserts that "all fields deemed impractical, such as philosophy, art history, and literature, will henceforth face a constant danger of being deemed unnecessary."

He also predicts that in "two or three generations, humanists ... will become an insignificant percentage of the country's university instructional workforce."

Without apology, Donoghue forecasts a gloomy future for our much-beloved humanities departments. I can sense the groundswell of anger forming as furious student-scholars prepare to descend upon this hapless man, armed with an Emersonian optimism and an encyclopedic knowledge of Shakespearian soliloquies.

But stay your keen knives, friends. We

must not stab the messenger.

As shocking as these assertions appear to us, many of us have never walked the hallowed corridors of a billion-dollar-endowed research university or had to ponder the ways to retain teaching staff during a budget crunch.

As Guilford students, all we have ever known are discussion-centered classes.

Unfortunately, according to Donoghue, the humanities have been in steady decline since the turn of the century, when the nagging waves of industrial pragmatism first began to erode the foundations of the scholar's ivory tower.

In his address to the graduating class of Pierce College of Business, Andrew Carnegie rejoiced "to know that (students') time has not been wasted upon dead languages, but has been fully occupied in obtaining a knowledge of shorthand and typewriting."

Alas, the price you put on a liberal arts education may be worthless in the near future. The dissemination of knowledge for knowledge's sake is quickly being supplanted by the drive to instill a marketable skill in today's college youth.

Donoghue points to the dire straits tenured professors now face in the business-model institution. Tenured and tenure-track professors constitute a mere 35 percent of the U.S. college system's staff, and

this number is rapidly declining.

Intimate classroom debates are anachronisms in this day and age, as professors are reduced to little more than conduits for the delivery of the skills needed to secure a job in the wide-world of a globalized economy.

As students (and customers) of Guilford College, how should we consider this soothsayer's warning? Why pour tuition (second only to Duke University) into a liberal arts education that will soon be defunct?

Political policy wonks would gawk at Donoghue's predictions. The presidential primaries alone generated hundreds of thousands of man-hours for bloggers and pundits, as well as journalists and news anchors.

And when art imitates political life, it manifests itself in projects such as Frost/Nixon, which is in turn an adaptation of a play. All of the actors, actresses, directors, screenwriters and playwrights involved at one time called themselves students of the fine arts.

Anyone who pays attention to headlines could tell you that the future of Asia shines brightly, and topics of interest ranging from Chinese politics to Indian diet habits are integral to the strategic quarterly planning of any aspiring international entrepreneur.

In an article for Newsweek, Jeremy McCarter ruminates on how culture and the arts helped shape and prepare our country for the historical ascendancy of Barack Obama.

McCarter entreats us to "think of what we've learned from Huck and Jim, 'Invisible Man,' Alvin Ailey's dances, 'Angels in America,' the blues. Better yet, try to imagine how we'd relate to one another without them."

Obama himself proclaims that, "In addition to giving our children the science and math skills they need to compete in the new global context, we should also encourage the ability to think creatively that comes from a meaningful arts education."

I am confident that my time spent studying the humanities at Guilford has indelibly shaped the perception of myself and the world; this is no simple lip service to the principles of this institution or the merits of liberal arts educations at large.

In the same ways that chemistry or physics light our understanding of the natural world, fields such as sociology, dance, literature and philosophy illuminate the way we interact with one another. They jointly document our history and predict our trajectory into the future.

Needless to say, that humanities degree is worth a lot more than the cynics would have you believe.

Letter to the Editor Campus acted to educate about Gaza

In her excellent piece on Rabbi Ben Packer's visit to Guilford, Megan Feil quotes a leader of the sponsoring club, Hillel, as saying, "We decided to hold this discussion when our school did nothing to educate students about it." I beg to differ with this sentiment.

A great deal of work was done behind the scenes from the beginning of the Gaza crisis, including outreach to the multifaceted community on and off-campus. Programs and panels were discussed and planned. That programs similar to previous ones at Guilford did not materialize was a result of many factors, including a decision to allow students to take the lead on this issue; the concern of potential speakers about possible response; and difficulty in finding experts on the topic who were willing to speak. One program was planned for Religious Emphasis Week, featuring a noted local scholar on the Middle East, but the invitation was declined.

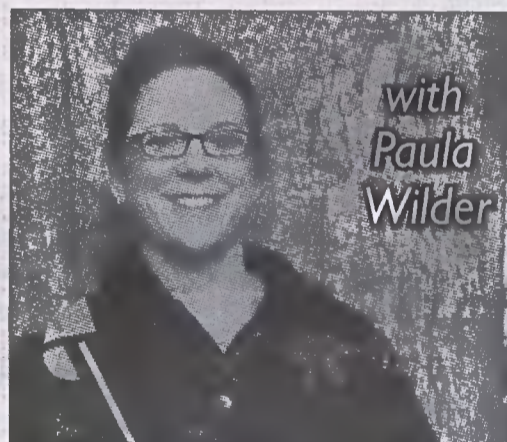
I might also mention that throughout the past fall semester a coalition of organizations and departments on campus presented a comprehensive series, "Perspectives on the Middle East," that brought scholars and peace activists to campus for many well-attended events. And planning continues for the future. There will be ongoing response from students, faculty, staff, and particular campus organizations to the situation in the Middle East.

Yes, tensions on campus can be felt, and, yes, it would have been great to have an immediate panel as we did for the tsunami, Katrina, and the financial crisis, but sometimes - as is so often the case regarding the Middle East - progress is made in incremental steps, in slow progress, and fraught with setbacks.

Max L. Carter

Director of the Friends Center and Campus Ministry Coordinator

Today's Lesson: Hype or honor?



My 17-year-old daughter is failing chemistry and doesn't care. In contrast, I am still trying to get over last semester's three-one-hundredths of a point that caused me to get an A- rather than an A.

There is something drastically wrong with this picture, but it is fact - no kidding.

The stark difference between my obsessive perfectionism and my daughter's flippant attitude caused me to ask some questions at the dean's list celebration on Jan. 27.

That night, I talked to some CCE students who posted dean's list grades. Several told me that one of their motivations for excelling was to provide a good example for their children.

I didn't have the heart to tell them that instead of my children looking to me as this great example, it gives them one more reason to call me names like, "freak," "weird," "show-off," etc.

Debra Webb '08 was one of those young moms at the celebration whose children serve as part of her motivation.

"I didn't set out to make the Dean's

List," said Webb, a five-time honoree.

"I just set out to do my best. Plus, I have two little girls and almost a little boy, and it is important to show them that even if you're busy, it is important to do well."

There were other similar comments, such as those of Linda Egidio, candidate for licensure in education studies.

"My goal is a 4.0," said Egidio. "This is my second time through. The first time I didn't take it seriously. Plus, I have two kids and I want to be a good example."

Other motivations for making exceptional grades were mentioned, such as building self-confidence, proving to yourself that you can do it, and commitment to your goals.

Senior and five-time honoree, Terry Goddard, felt that receiving the honor reached beyond the academics and home life and into the workplace.

"Making the dean's list shows a commitment to your actions and that you have completed a project with conviction and stick-to-itiveness," said Goddard.

Goddard plans to pursue graduate school after Guilford and believes that her grades are an important aspect for that future aspiration, as well.

Goddard's reasons were beginning to convince me that excelling was something more important than supposedly helping my children.

"I feel like this is an important time in my life and I need to do my best," said junior psychology major Edwina Greene. "I didn't come here to play. My dream is to finish college."

I love dream talk and Greene's seriousness about good grades fed my obsessive perfectionism.

But, first-year Casey Vandergrift brought the celebration down to earth for me.

"I would work this hard even without the odd refreshment combination of hummus and chocolate cake," said Vandergrift. "But seriously, recognition is not expected, because who else recognizes other smarty pants walking around?"

Vandergrift didn't seem to mind whether he was on the list or not and his flippant attitude bothered me a little bit, so I asked him how it made him feel to realize that he had made this great accomplishment.

"I didn't get a shirt made or anything," said Vandergrift.

His reply contrasted to comments by Vice President for Academic Affairs and Academic Dean Adrienne Israel.

"This is a time to celebrate achievement and excellence without having to apologize for it," said Israel. "If you've got it, flaunt it."

According to Israel, it seems that we should all go out and have t-shirts made.

But, I still don't know that fulfilling dreams, realizing hopes and aspirations for the future, eating chocolate cake and hummus, or receiving superior grades will help my daughter pass chemistry or even motivate her to care.

Flippancy over failing - preoccupied with perfection.

We both have our problems and the dean's list didn't solve either one.