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PRICELESS:
THE VALUE PROPOSITION FOR THE
HUMANITIES

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met co-referaat van
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2016

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door

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VOORWOORD

Internationaal woedt al enkele jaren een verhit debat over de plaats en de functie van de geesteswetenschappen in de universiteit en de samenleving. In de Amerikaanse context kunnen de kosten van een universitaire opleiding flink oplopen en studeren veel jonge mensen af met een forse schuld. Daardoor is er veel discussie over de kansen op een goede baan na een studie die vooral op de geesteswetenschappen gericht is. Met de nadruk die in Nederland de afgelopen jaren gelegd is op de ‘valorisatie’ van onderzoeksresultaten en het belang van wetenschap voor onze economische groei, wordt ook vaak de bijdrage van de geesteswetenschappen bediscussieerd. En ook onze Nederlandse universiteiten met een faculteit der geesteswetenschappen worstelen met een afnemende belangstelling van studenten, vooral voor de talenstudies.

Toch kunnen we ons geen van allen een samenleving voorstellen waar de kunst en de geesteswetenschappen niet een belangrijke bijdrage leveren aan ons cultureel klimaat, waar onze internationale oriëntatie niet gevoed wordt door een kennis van taal en cultuur uit andere landen, waar onze politieke besluitvorming niet gevoed wordt door kennis van de geschiedenis, de filosofie of de media. In het denken van de Verlichting speelden ook de geesteswetenschappen een cruciale rol.

Bij deze Winterlezing hebben we voor het eerst een buitenlandse spreker, Gene Block, rector van de Universiteit van Californië - Los Angeles (UCLA), uitgenodigd die ons meenam naar de kern van het debat in de VS. Sijbolt Noorda zette daarnaast de Nederlandse discussie uiteen, die zo zichtbaar naar buiten kwam in de tweede Maagdenhuisbezetting vorig jaar. De discussie werd die avond in kleine kring voortgezet met een aantal direct betrokkenen in Nederland. Daarmee gaf de KHMW opnieuw een podium voor een zeer actueel onderwerp op het snijvlak van wetenschap en maatschappelijk debat. Met deze publicatie willen we ook diegenen die er helaas niet bij konden zijn, deelgenoot van die discussie maken.

Louise Gunning-Schepers
voorzitter

PRICELESS: THE VALUE PROPOSITION FOR THE HUMANITIES

Gene D. Block, UCLA Chancellor

I am honored to have the opportunity to speak with you today about a matter of shared concern: the importance of the humanities in higher education, during a time when we see them being undervalued and even eliminated at universities worldwide.



I speak to you, not from the perspective of a humanities scholar, my expertise resides in the sciences, specifically neuroscience. Rather, I speak to you as a university leader who is deeply concerned by threats to the integrity of our pluriform traditions. I also speak to you as a grandparent who wishes to make certain that succeeding generations have the same rich opportunities for scholarly exploration that I have enjoyed.

So what exactly are the humanities?

The humanities are usually understood to be the study of how people interpret and document the human experience.

Through the centuries, people have employed philosophy, literature, religion, art, music, history and language in order to analyze and record human existence.

There is intellectual overlap in related disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology. However, these are usually captured under the designation of “social sciences.”

I am keenly aware that I am speaking today in a land that produced some of the greatest intellectual and artistic minds in all of history.

The Dutch, of course, have a long and distinguished history of humanistic study.

One only needs to consider the contributions of Spinoza or Erasmus and many others to fully appreciate the stake that this country has in the protection and survival of humanistic endeavors.

However, sadly, what we do see today is a questioning of the importance of studying the humanities, which is a troubling phenomenon affecting universities everywhere:

In Japan, the government seeks to eliminate or reduce humanities and social sciences departments at more than 50 Japanese universities.

In the U.K., Nicky Morgan, the Secretary of Education, warned in 2014 that school children who focus exclusively on arts and humanities-style subjects risk restricting their future career path.

In the United States, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences finds that four-year universities are steadily winnowing their liberal arts courses.

The American news media reports that art history, music and even modern languages, including French and German, are being dropped from the curriculum in major universities.

And, some schools have actually combined their English, philosophy and history departments. While the teaching of these topics may continue, these “contractions” almost certainly damage disciplinary scholarship and deprive students of the “deep dive” that often leads to greatest insights.

U.S. students, pressured to have practical majors, are fleeing the humanities.

Today, only 8 percent of U.S. students now major in the humanities according to data from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The data for UCLA is not much better - 9 percent of our under-graduates are humanities majors.

Unfortunately we must recognize that in the U.S. the lack of interest in becoming humanities majors may be the consequence of another problem. The increasing student loan debt burden and student concerns about such debt may be impacting their choices of undergraduate majors.

The supposed impracticality of the humanities is a common refrain of critics who claim that such an old-fashioned education is out-of-step with today's economic realities.

I don't think the U.S. unique in this regard, so I will quote a U.S. state governor who, in discussing his state's flagship public university, said:

"If you want to take gender studies, that's fine. Go to a private school and take it. But I don't want to subsidize that if that's not going to get someone a job."

Another American politician, who is also a candidate to be the next U.S. President, went a bit further, saying:

"So you can decide if it's worth borrowing \$50,000 to major in Greek philosophy. Because after all, the market for Greek philosophers has been very tight for 2,000 years."

It is important to understand that this criticism is not unique to the study of the humanities. The arguments can be used to call into question the value of the study of astronomy, archaeology or any other discipline that does not seem to promote "job-ready" students.

In the title of my presentation, I refer to the humanities as “priceless,” but I am obviously referring to “societal value” not “market value.”

That is an important distinction and one that I will revisit a bit later.

It is certainly appropriate and defensible to ask the question: “What is the value proposition for the humanities?”

Put another way, “How do we justify our societal investment in these endeavors?”

I believe that every major problem that we face in the world today, whether technological or not, requires contextual decision-making informed by humanistic study.

More than a decade ago, the late Professor Richard Smalley, a Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, created a list of the ten greatest challenges facing our world in the next 50 years.

These “Grand Challenges” included our non-sustainable thirst for more energy, food security, protection of the environment, terrorism and war, threats to democracy, and population growth.

Since then, the list has changed relatively little, although the order may have shifted somewhat.

Without a doubt, terrorism and war, which have produced a refugee crisis of enormous proportions, must be near the very top of the list from a European perspective.

While Professor Smalley argued correctly that the world’s challenges required that we educate more scientists and engineers to help address these issues, I would also add that the solution to nearly every grand challenge resides more in the understanding of values and behavioral actions of humans than on a singular focus on technology.

Another of Professor Smalley's grand challenges is the preservation of the environment.

While there is no argument that new technologies will help limit environmental pollution, I am not convinced that is the real solution.

I believe the solution to the environmental crisis lies elsewhere - in behavioral changes informed by humanistic arguments about geographical and societal equity, values and choices.

While world powers must continue to work on limiting carbon emissions and finding clean alternatives to fossil fuels, these are not ends in themselves.

Pope Francis, perhaps the most well-known religious leader - and humanist - in the world today, said it best.

In speaking to the U.N. General Assembly last September, he said climate change was the direct result of global economic and social inequality.

The pope reminds us that there is an underlying and complex human dimension to be considered as well, if we are going to fix the root causes of environmental pollution.

I would like to now turn to the world's academies of higher education. Universities play a key role in ensuring strong humanistic traditions.

After all, classical studies have been the very foundation and backbone of institutions of higher learning since the beginnings of the university.

It is no accident that the world's best universities have extraordinarily strong science and humanities programs: Oxford, Harvard, Yale, and

The University of Tokyo all support extraordinary humanistic scholarship in addition to their exceptional strength in the sciences.

It is also notable that countries that historically separated the humanities and social sciences from the natural sciences and engineering have increasingly moved to integrate institutions together to achieve more academically comprehensive institutions.

A recent example of this is the fusion of multiple Russian institutions into Russia's Federal Far Eastern University in Vladivostok.

Or, a little further back, in the 1980s, Tsinghua University in Beijing moved away from the Soviet model of specialized institutions, creating a comprehensive university. By bringing schools of humanities, social science and arts and design into a historically strong engineering and science institution, Tsinghua, today, is among the top 50 universities in the world according to the London Times Higher Education World Rankings.

A holistic approach to higher education produces well-rounded students who refresh and strengthen our civic and social institutions.

Each of us have witnessed how humanistic studies, including the arts, has led many of our students into productive lives of service in government, law and other civic and social organizations that form the foundations of our society and promote the public good.

Many of our world's political leaders have educational backgrounds in the humanities, including your Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who studied history and once had ambitions of becoming a concert pianist.

Even some of our leading scientists have impressive credentials in the humanities. In July 2012 Robbert Dijkgraaf became the Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, a highly prestigious position in the U.S., after he had been the Director of

your Dutch Academy of Sciences. His scientific education was in physics at Utrecht; however, he interrupted his scientific education and pursued painting at the Rietveld Academie.

Humanities education is also in the background of some of our leading techno-gurus. Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, studied calligraphy in college. His comments to graduates during Stanford University's Commencement ceremonies in 2005, seem to say it all:

"...I decided to take a calligraphy class to learn how to learn [calligraphy].... It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating. None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life. But 10 years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac."

Classical studies help students develop the capacity for critical thought; the ability to communicate ideas and concepts with precision; and foster an understanding and appreciation for other cultures and customs.

A student who possesses these skills has a distinct advantage in a global economy that relies heavily on communication and critical analysis to reach varied stakeholders.

The humanities also help us to contextualize scientific advances. A humanist asks, "How does this invention fit with our traditions?" or "Will this new discovery have a positive or negative impact on individuals and on our society?"

These issues are not hypothetical - in fact, many ethical issues about technology are literally staring us in the face. Take CRISPR technology which has enormous potential to alter the genome of food crops, animals and other organisms, including humans. The ability to alter the genetics of an individual and all of their descendants has profound implications that will require the efforts of our very best ethicists.

As leaders in education, we share a commitment to vigorously defending the humanities.

But how do we respond to these increasingly vocal and influential critics?

First, we have to accept responsibility that we have not always made the best arguments in defense of the humanities, allowing the attention to STEM disciplines to shift the public discussion away from the importance of humanistic study. In some instances we have shown too much institutional rigidity to change, resisting attempts to reform curricula, or embrace novel programs. We must be more open to considering what a contemporary humanities education should look like.

Considering allies, I hope we can continue to establish connections across the continents and speak as a united voice in support of classical studies.

Many of us are also searching for new advocates and partners who share our conviction that the humanities are relevant and useful in the modern world.

I have found a few allies in surprising places:

The U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, requires its future officers to take humanities and social science courses. Some cadets even major in philosophy.

The U.S. Army believes exposure to humanities produces officers with the leadership qualities needed to make sound decisions in rapidly-changing environments and circumstances.

The famed Culinary Institute of America, also in New York, teaches sociology and languages to aspiring chefs because such courses help

with restaurant business plans and employee management, both of which are critical to success in such a competitive industry.

These unusual examples from the military and from a culinary institute suggest that exposure to the humanities can have positive impacts across the educational/vocational spectrum. These are arguments of why it is important to broaden access to the humanities.

A variety of non-academic and non-partisan commentators in Europe, Asia and North America are writing provocative defenses of the humanities in publications as varied as *The Guardian*, *The Japan Times* and *Time Magazine*.

Last summer, *Forbes*, the influential financial magazine, published an insightful opinion piece in its Tech section on how philosophy can make you a better business leader.

We must also be ready to dispel some of the myths that revolve around the financial/employment handicap one must endure if one chooses to focus on humanistic disciplines.

Without giving the critics undue attention, we can and should be ready to point to studies indicating that the humanities is not an economic dead-end for students.

In fact, studies that track humanities graduates reveal some statistics that may surprise many critics.

For instance, a 2014 study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that,

“At peak earnings ages (56-60 years) workers who majored as undergraduates in the humanities or social sciences earn annually about \$2,000 more than those who majored as undergraduates in professional or pre-professional fields.”

I suspect that this kind of statistic does not differ much between the U.S. and Europe.

And we can complement positive statistics with examples of numerous successful business people who have backgrounds in humanistic studies. I have already mentioned Steve Jobs of Apple.

Another example is Jack Ma, the founder of the world's largest online store, Alibaba. Mr. Ma earned a bachelor's degree in English from Hangzhou Normal University in China.

Jack Ma understands that it really makes little sense professionally to focus on one discipline, one way of doing things, precisely at a time when the global economy requires adaptability and often the skill to do two or three different things at once.

And it is precisely this kind of multi-tasking, multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary world that we must prepare our students to enter and thrive.

At UCLA, we are looking to broaden the reach of humanities to include students who have little or no exposure to these courses.

We want them to experience how the humanities can contribute to their own lives and areas of academic study.

We are working to create partnerships between the humanities and the sciences across a range of departments and disciplines.

One of the emerging curricular tracks is called Environmental Humanities.

Faculty and students from humanities, social sciences and the physical sciences explore the relationship between culture and conservation, and discuss the multidimensional aspects of environmental ethics.

We are also developing Digital Humanities, Medical Humanities and interdisciplinary minors in Global Health, Entrepreneurship and Food Studies, to name a few.

I am encouraged to see other universities around the world engaging in the same kind of creative thinking around cross-disciplinary study.

I believe that the sciences and the humanities must not merely “coexist”.

Rather, I am convinced that the excellence of a university’s curriculum in the 21st century will be measured by how the sciences and humanities inform and interact with one another. We must take full advantage of our disciplinary bandwidth to educate students with diverse educational backgrounds.

It is these types of students who are best equipped to solve the social, environmental and technological challenges - in our ever-changing world.

Thank you.

CO-REFERAAT

Sijbolt Noorda, President emeritus Universiteit van Amsterdam

Ladies and Gentlemen!

President Block's reflections on today's university and the place of the humanities are well measured. Most of what he said I can easily relate to.

So I shall not be reiterating his remarks but rather add a couple of comments from where I sit, in The Netherlands and in Europe.



If one is to describe the present position of the humanities an old story comes to mind. Secretary-General Leonid Brezhnev was once asked by a journalist how he would describe the present situation of the Soviet Union in one word. "Good", he said. "And, Sir, in two words". "Not good".

It would be a mistake to paint a gloomy picture. The humanities are a vital part of the university, in every sense of the term. They share with other disciplines what some one has called the secret of the success of the university: the ability to be connected to and be of great value to specific sectors of our societies and cultures. Law, medicine, the sciences, engineering, economics, philosophy, religious studies, teacher training - they all are closely linked to parts of society, at the same time contributing to and being influenced by what happens in the world outside university. Universities - and in a way all of education - are no autonomous powers in society, unmoved movers so to say, they rather share the societal tide. And it is particularly in their ability to be in tune with their environment that they are functioning best. This of course does not imply that academia is simply echoing outside sounds. What it does mean is that to be understood and to be able to contribute academia must speak in such a way that makes sense to the rest of us.

The good news is that in many places the valuable contributions the humanities can make to societies, are seen as vitally important. There is a strong recent surge of interest in the liberal arts in Asia. People realize that no society can only live on business and engineering expertise. The soft matter of cultures, families, religions, education, coping and herding do matter. This results in the recent founding of liberal arts colleges in places like Singapore, Korea and Japan while at the same time part of the political leadership in the US is blaming liberal arts education as selfish and unproductive, and not worth the public money they are receiving. A truly bizarre paradox.

Humanities are vital also in the sense that they constantly reinvent themselves, explore new fields and design new methods, some times on their own, more often in collaboration with other disciplines. It would be utterly wrong to assume that engineering or medicine are alone in their adaptability or powers of innovation.

In my time as president of the Universiteit van Amsterdam I often liked to compare past and present in different fields. Even inside academia I then would find out that while everyone was aware of the fundamental changes taking place in the field of biology (mainly as a consequence of the turn to molecular science and the application of digitized methods and tools), few outsiders were aware of similar changes in the fields of law, psychology, communication or art history. These changes easily go unnoticed, apparently and paradoxically because they are all too familiar to all of us. Gradual developments in our own culture and society we do not experience and mark the same way we look upon more distant fields most of us have no direct relation to.

So yes, the humanities are a vital part of the university, very much like most of the other disciplines. And yes, the story must be told, loud and clear, that they are not a museum of past thinking but as vibrant a place as anywhere.

So much for the good news. The not so good news is not to be

underrated, however. It is partly about external conditions, partly about internal attitude.

In terms of research funding the humanities in most national systems are worse off than almost all their colleagues. Fewer sources and lower budgets. A look at the European Research funding schemes is telling. The STEM-fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine) are getting relatively generous funding options. For the humanities and social sciences they are scarce. In addition to that most performance indicators are designed to fit the STEM-cases. If applied to the rest of the university it looks as if they are not doing as well. The silly thing is that if one would do the reverse the result would be the reverse. Imagine measuring medical research performance on the basis of the volume of published monographs.

So there is work to do to make indicators a fair reflection of realities. On the other hand, the application of new criteria can have a positive effect. Some years ago British research council requested humanities scholars to report on the impact of their work, like they used to in STEM-fields. Once the initial opposition was replaced by creative acceptance this turned out to be an excellent way to show your relevance to education, to culture, to society, to world order.

This brings me to my final point. In all my years in university leadership positions I have observed that most scholars either tacitly comply with changing conditions and live with new norms or loud and clearly complain about them and about the degrees of neglect they suffer. It is much rarer to witness celebration, to see colleagues celebrate change and adapt to new paradigms with creativity and dedication. I would do us in the humanities - yes, I do belong to this tribe as well - no harm if we would rather celebrate than complain or passively comply. There are at least two good reasons to do so: there is an awful lot to celebrate in today's humanities, and if we are looking for support and positive rewards, we should remember that most people love backing winners much better than backing self proclaimed losers. So let's celebrate.

OVERZICHT WINTERLEZINGEN VANAF 1986

- 1986 Mr. Ch.M.J.A. Moons, De rechten van de mensen en de plichten van de rechter.
- 1987 Dr. ir. H.L. Beckers, Een overzicht van de werkzaamheden en plannen van het Nederlands Forum voor techniek en wetenschap.
- 1988 Mr. C.J.A. van Lede, Pressiegroepen in verandering. Het zich wijzigende patroon van pressiegroepen, hun opereren en samenstelling.
- 1989 Drs. B.F. baron van Ittersum, Amsterdam in Europees perspectief. Amsterdam als financieel centrum in Europa 1992.
- 1990 Drs. T.C. Braakman, Bestuurlijke samenwerking in een regio rondom een grote stad.
- 1991 Prof. ir. H.P. van Heel, Maat, eigen tijd en orde.
- 1992 Dr. J.E. Andriessen, Beleid en groei.
- 1993 Jhr. drs. P.A.C. Beelaerts van Blokland, Bestuurlijke organisatie in en van Nederland.
- 1994 Dr. J.M. Goudswaard, De Treuhand.
- 1995 Mr. P.J.H. Jonkman, De diplomatieke praktijk sinds 1945.
- 1996 Ir. W.C.M. van Lieshout, Het hoger onderwijs op weg naar de 21ste eeuw.
- 1997 Jhr. mr. A.A. Loudon, Politiek en bedrijfsleven. Enkele persoonlijke ervaringen.
- 1998 Ir. J.J. Slechte, Economie en ecologie.
- 1999 Prof. drs. C.A.J. Herkströter, De maatschappelijke verantwoordelijkheid van de onderneming.
- 2000 Dr. A.H.E.M. Wellink, Eén jaar Euro, één jaar ervaring met gemeenschappelijk monetair beleid.
- 2001 Mr. I.W. Opstelten, Vraagstukken inzake de sociale infrastructuur van een grote stad in Nederland.
- 2002 Wetenschapsdebat.
- 2003 K. Storm, De beschadigde reputatie van het (internationale) topmanagement. Co-referent Mr. C.J.A. van Lede.
- 2004 Mevr. Dr. A.C. Wolff-Albers, Voor rede vatbaar. Co-referent Dr. P. Nijkamp.

- 2005 Drs. C.O.A. baron Schimmelpenninck van der Oije, Graag of niet. Mogelijkheden van sponsoring van musea ten tijde van een terugtrekkende overheid. Co-referent Mevr. P.W. Boll-Kruseman.
- 2006 Prof. mr. P. van Vollenhoven, Betekenis van het onafhankelijk onderzoek en het effect daarvan op het veiligheidsbeleid.
- 2007 Mr. W.E. Haak, Is (in Nederland) het vertrouwen in de rechterlijke macht aan het afnemen? Co-referent Mevr. Mr. L.Y.M. Gonçalves-Ho Kang You.
- 2008 Prof. dr. J.C. Arnbak, Telecommunicatie: van monopolies naar volledige marktwerking. Co-referent Mevr. Drs. T.A. Maas-Brouwer.
- 2009 Dr. G.J. Wijers, Overleven door duurzame innovatie. Zijn we klaar voor de volgende Kondratieff? Co-referent Prof. dr. E.M. Meijer.
- 2010 Dr. R.H.A. Plasterk, Wetenschap en politiek. Van wat is en wat zou moeten zijn.
- 2011 Drs. D.M. Sluimers, De toekomst van het Nederlandse pensioenstelsel. Co-referent Mevr. Mr. J.A. Kellermann.
- 2012 Dr. A.H.E.M. Wellink, Quo vadis Europa? Co-referent Dr. G.J. Wijers.
- 2013 Drs. W. Pijbes, Mijn eerste museum.
- 2014 Ir. W. Draijer, Plakkaat van Verbindinghe.
- 2015 Mevr. Drs. L.B.J. van Geest, Belastingherziening: tips & tricks.

