

The Future of the Humanities at Princeton University

*A statement by
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The Humanities are as important and relevant as ever, both for their intrinsic value in understanding our diverse traditions and our current challenges and also for their role in preparing students for their lives and careers. In an increasingly interconnected and fast-changing world, our students need a grasp of what it means to understand other cultures as well as their own, and they need the critical and interdisciplinary skills that the Humanities contribute as part of a liberal arts education (Humanities Task Force Report, p. 3).

With this statement, the Task Force on the Future of the Humanities articulated both its starting assumptions and its aspirations. The report of the task force lays out a wide range of recommendations designed to keep the humanities central, vital, and relevant to Princeton's research and teaching mission. We are grateful to the task force for its broad-based examination of the state of the humanities at Princeton and beyond and for its thoughtful report about the future of this part of the academic landscape. In this memo, we respond to the task force report by identifying the recommendations on which we will take immediate action, those that need additional study and development, and those that strike us, at least at this stage, to be of lower priority.

The work of the task force was guided by a charge we laid out for them in an initial meeting. That charge outlined the set of general questions we wanted the group to address. We asked them to consider Princeton's strengths and weaknesses, as well as its opportunities and challenges in the humanities. We asked about current and potential collaborations with the Lewis Center for the Arts, the Princeton University Art Museum, the Library, and international initiatives. We asked for the highest priority initiatives Princeton should undertake to extend its leadership in the humanities and also to ensure the excellence and impact of its undergraduate and graduate teaching programs in the humanities (see <http://www.princeton.edu/strategicplan/taskforces/humanities/>). This charge provides a useful context for understanding the task force's recommendations.

The task force report outlined three high-priority recommendations: a Humanities Institute, a Program in Film and Media Studies, and a new building for the Art Museum. The Program in Film and Media Studies is clearly of interest to many parts of the campus, and we received many comments addressed to that portion of the task force report. We accordingly begin our response with it.

Program in Film and Media Studies

There are many compelling arguments for the development of a Program in Film and Media Studies. We are persuaded that film and media studies will have a transformative impact

across the arts and humanities. Demand for courses, teaching and programming opportunities, and faculty hiring in film and media studies is very high among faculty and students alike. At present, the lack of an established program makes it difficult for Princeton to hire faculty members to meet these needs. As the task force report notes, “Film and Media Studies consists of a humanistic methodology that will illuminate, inflect, and even transform all our humanities fields. It is high time to put Princeton on the map in this area.” We could not agree more.

One of the great strengths of the recommendation to develop film and media studies, in our view, is the opportunity it will provide for collaboration between the humanities and the arts. The task force report acknowledges this strength and yet argues that the program should ultimately be housed under a humanities umbrella. We would suggest instead that the institutional architecture reflect the role of the program as a critical link between the humanities and the arts. The development of the program must be a joint endeavor from inception.

We fully endorse the task force’s aims for this new unit. In their view (and language), the program will:

- promote visual literacy (and not just visual saturation), encouraging facility with the media that constitute the 21st-century media matrix
- create a space of convergence across the disciplines that will be hugely galvanizing and energizing
- include, in addition to the departments and programs in the humanities and the Lewis Center, other campus units such as the Woodrow Wilson School, Computer Science and the Engineering School in general, the Princeton University Art Museum, and the School of Architecture
- inspire new research and pedagogy, curricular innovation, as well as new methodologies for studying history, poetry, music, and many other fields or forms of expression
- form a faculty seminar that can train faculty and graduate student AIs for film and media studies, thus increasing the level of competence in film studies across the humanities and, as noted above, opening the door for new forms of research and inquiry

The next step is to convene a Working Group on Film and Media Studies to develop a full proposal for the new program. We anticipate that this proposal will draw heavily on an excellent white paper produced last year by the Committee for Film Studies; we would like to constitute a separate working group, however, to consider the program’s development in the context of the broader strategic planning and campus planning processes now underway. We will establish this working group immediately.

Princeton Humanities Institute

We turn now to the recommendation that the University should create a Princeton Humanities Institute. The goal of the proposed Institute is to provide a central focus and a strong core for the humanities at Princeton. The Institute is envisioned as both a physical and an organizational hub of activity, a way of connecting people, seeding projects, and drawing energy toward a common purpose. We appreciate the value of these aims but believe that there are unanswered questions about whether such a centered view of the humanities is viable or desirable at this stage in the division's development.

Over the past two decades, the humanities at Princeton have developed around multiple hubs, with the renovation of Chancellor Green/East Pyne to house many of the language and literature departments, the creation of the Lewis Center (itself distributed widely across campus), and the renovation of Firestone Library (curiously unmentioned in the task force report). The movement has been in the direction of a multi-nodal, distributed intellectual and physical geography, with the task force recommendations for a new Art Museum facility (imagined as a "visual and humanistic hub") and a new Program in Film and Media Studies continuing in that vein.

In this context, the recommendation of a "central Humanities Institute" raises difficult and arguably unproductive questions about who and what belong at the center of the humanities and whether the other activities and spaces that have been developed in recent years are in fact peripheral. Many of the comments we received about the task force report expressed these concerns. The task force clearly hoped that the Institute would serve as a corrective to the increased dispersion of the humanities on campus, that it would provide fertile ground for encounters and collaborations between humanists and artists and also with colleagues from other parts of the University. These are worthy goals, but it was not clear to commentators on the report, or to us, that the proposed design and location of the Humanities Institute would accomplish that goal any better than existing structures do.

Of course, existing structures may well be in need of revitalization and additional resources. We agree with the task force that the Council for the Humanities has served and continues to serve a critically important integrative function for the humanities on campus. Indeed, its mission statement, quoted in the task force report, is worth repeating here:

In all of its endeavors, the Council's goals are to encourage cooperation among departments, to foster interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship, to focus attention on problems common to all aspects of humanistic study, and to administer the Council endowment in a way that shall best enhance teaching, scholarship, and faculty development in the humanities at Princeton.

We appreciate that the task facing the Humanities Council has grown substantially since its founding 62 years ago, and yet we believe that this organizational structure continues to serve the humanities and the University well. We will work with the director and executive committee of the Council to insure that it has the resources it needs going forward.

New space for the Art Museum and the humanities

We now turn to the recommendation of a new building to house the Princeton University Art Museum. The Art Museum is, as the task force report notes, one of the most important academic museums in the world. Its collection, its leadership, and its staff are all world class. The Museum's programming is ambitious and creative, its reach restricted primarily by the limitations of its current facility. The task force recommends a new Museum facility, located on or near the current site.

We agree in principle that a new Museum would be desirable and that any such facility should be located on the same site as the current one, which fosters the historic linkage between the Museum and the Department of Art and Archaeology and facilitates collaboration with other scholars and departments throughout the campus. Our colleagues in the Office of Design and Construction undertook a study some years ago and determined that it would be possible to meet the Museum's needs on the current site.

Whether or not we can build the Museum will depend heavily on the level of donor interest. The University's own investment in the Museum must be considered in the context of other facilities needs around the campus, including needs in the humanities. Humanities units are currently distributed across a wide swath of campus stretching from 185 Nassau to the still-in-progress Performing Arts Complex, encompassing, depending on how one counts, close to 20 buildings. Some of these buildings are brand new; others are in the process of being renovated; and still others are in need of renovation. The task force report speaks at some length to the untapped potential of Chancellor Green and East Pyne, as well as to the possibilities for Green Hall; both of these structures deserve careful study. The campus has not yet felt, and will not feel for some time, the full impact of the new Performing Arts Complex and the renovations of Firestone Library. With so many building projects underway or under consideration, it is critical that we take a holistic look at space for the humanities, with an eye toward providing the necessary spaces for individual units, while maximizing the ways in which shared space can connect people, seed ideas, and prompt collaboration. A broad study will also enable us to treat the spaces between buildings as part of the program—that is, as potential sites of inspiration and encounter, rather than simply as distances to be traversed.

To this end, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the University Architect are in the process of a planning study for the humanities. The planning study will take into account the resources within existing facilities, current and projected space needs, and space that will become available upon the completion of current building projects. The results of the study will inform the provost's office in decisions related to the use of existing and future facilities, and the development office in decisions about fundraising priorities.

Other recommendations

The task force report makes many other recommendations for how to improve undergraduate and graduate education in the humanities at Princeton. Here, we offer a brief response to each recommendation in turn.

- *The task force recommends instituting a structure for sixth-year funding for select graduate students.* This was also one of the central recommendations of the Task Force on the Graduate School, and graduate student funding arose as a topic in other task forces as well. The administration is currently working with departments to determine how best to address these needs.
- *The task force recommends the development of teaching opportunities for graduate students.* Several efforts are underway at the departmental level, including an expansion of the English department's very successful program of faculty-graduate student co-teaching that was approved by the Academic Planning Group this year.
- *The task force recommends expanded opportunities for undergraduates and graduates to have significant international experience.* This recommendation came also from the Task Force on Regional Studies and will be considered in the context of that task force report.
- *The task force recommends a clearer organization of international initiatives.* This recommendation was implemented in response to the report of the Internationalization Self-Study Working Group.
- *The task force recommends enabling AB undergraduates to double major.* This recommendation is currently under consideration by the Task Force on General Education.
- *The task force recommends enhancing existing interdisciplinary gateway humanities courses and creating new courses and certificate programs.* The Humanities Council is currently implementing these recommendations.
- *The task force recommends requiring language study of all Princeton AB undergraduates, regardless of proficiency.* This recommendation is currently under consideration by the Task Force on General Education.
- *The task force advocates the eventual establishment of a Department of Linguistics.* Searches for new faculty members in linguistics are ongoing; the eventual status of the unit will depend on the success of faculty hiring and development in this field.
- *The University should establish a working group to develop plans for teaching less commonly taught languages.* This recommendation came also from the Task Force on Regional Studies and will be considered in the context of that task force report.
- *The arts and humanities need to develop closer ties for joint teaching and collaboration.* We agree entirely and vigorously. The administration will look for ways to foster those collaborations, beginning with film and media studies.

Conclusion

We thank the members of the Task Force on the Future of the Humanities for a stimulating and thoughtful report. We look forward to pursuing these recommendations to ensure that the humanities at Princeton will flourish for years to come.