

Studies of foreign cultures/languages as the educational necessity

by Mark Leiderman, Laura Olson Osterman, Beverly Weber

Frequently, we encounter the perception of our field - literary and cultural scholarship - as a “supplementary” education, preparing for leisure-time activities (reading, travelling, theatre-going) rather than for a profession and civic life. This attitude to the humanities is popular among students and colleagues alike. The mantra about the importance of liberal arts education often can be easily reduced to this less than academic approach. The purpose of this paper is to explain the professional and ethical (rather than recreational) relevance of humanities, and especially, literary and cultural studies of foreign countries. We also wish to propose steps that would highlight the professional aspects of the humanities at CU.

Industries and businesses want people with humanities training - because they have developed important writing, interpretive and research skills, as well as practice in creative and critical thinking. The “myth of the unemployed humanities major” has been dispelled a long time ago. According to [NACE's Job Outlook 2016 survey](#), important hireable attributes include “written communication skills, problem-solving skills, verbal communication skills, and a strong work ethic”. All these skills are more associated with humanities education rather than with STEM.¹

But most importantly, the education that the humanities offer, also has a moral dimension -- not only “work ethics”, but ethics in general. Our disciplines are based on the accumulation of cultural knowledge and developing cultural richness at the same time. In our classes we explore values and moral choices that also have political relevance. This is why teaching of literature and arts is a form of moral education. Especially important are foreign literatures and cultures -- through them we confront students with worlds that are unknown. In doing so, our students are taught ethical dimensions of encounters with people and cultures that are different, but are also given the space to reflect and critique their own cultures. Also, humanities disciplines are always critical of themselves, and their ability to transform themselves is something that we teach. We prepare students to resist dangerous stereotypes and biases, we make them face their responsibility for what they do and what’s happening with the world around them.

Our specific area - humanities educating about non-American cultures - offers students intellectual navigation for the globalized world. Anyone working transnationally must draw on knowledge produced by the humanities in cultural studies, history, International Affairs, etc. It is equally important for those who are involved in humanities and social studies of the US, since the self-understanding of the US as a country of immigrants is built on a dialogue between initially foreign cultures. It is also an understanding that must itself be challenged, given the history of Native American genocide so relevant to Colorado's own history. The values of diversity are thus inseparable from the understanding of foreign cultures as well as relationships

¹ See also: <https://www.aacu.org/leap/liberal-education-nation-blog/myth-unemployed-humanities-major>

to indigeneity. We prepare our students for living and working in the increasingly globalized world, including the global market, working in foreign countries, etc. Our disciplines methodically undermine such prevailing ideologies as US isolationism and exceptionalism. If we want our students to compete in the global economy, we need to teach them understanding the world around the US, and the humanities offer broad and effective apparatus for such an understanding.

We believe that the CAS needs to highlight the significance of study of foreign cultures/literatures/languages for our students. Departments focused on this study cannot be treated as “service departments” since they produce their share of high-quality scholarship and contribute to CU’s visibility in the national and international scholarly communities.

Among practical steps that might highlight the importance of studies in foreign cultures, we suggest the following:

- 1) If we want to produce competitive education in humanities, we should require all students graduating in humanities, to study **two** foreign languages, with at least one on an advance level. By this means, our graduates will be able to compete better on global and national markets alike. (It will also confront a popular prejudice that with English, one needs not to know foreign languages.)
- 2) Many universities have Spanish, German, Russian etc. Houses. Following this example, we need to create RAPs or dorms associated with a particular language/culture. These “houses” could accommodate native speakers along with heritage speakers and advanced students of the given language. A communication within this RAP only in the given language should be a condition for the enrollment. This measure, aside from an obvious opportunity for the language practice, will give a boost to the internationalization of CU.
- 3) The CAS might design a calendar of and budget for college-wide annual festivals dedicated to a particular national culture. Respective departments would organize them along with students’ group on a rotation basis. This will raise the visibility of foreign languages and cultures on campus and significantly contribute to the atmosphere of inclusiveness and worldliness, essential for the university life.
- 4) Study abroad is crucial for the student specializing in a given language/cultures program. However, the cost of the summer study abroad programs offered by CU is discriminatingly high (\$11K and higher for 6 weeks). We think that the CAS should establish scholarships covering a **full cost** of the study abroad program for outstanding students in foreign languages. By this means, success in foreign languages will be incentivized, and the best students will be able to raise their skills to the proper level.