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Linda Silka

University of Maine, lnsilka7@gmail.com

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The Importance of the Humanities:

Reflections from Leading Policymakers

by Linda Silka

Maine is fortunate in being served by state policy leaders who care deeply about the humanities and who have devoted considerable thought to the role of the humanities in Maine’s past, present, and future. Four of these leading policymakers generously made themselves available to be interviewed about the humanities and policy for this special issue of *Maine Policy Review*: Tom Desjardin, Peter Mills, Margaret (Peggy) Rotundo, and Earle G. Shettleworth Jr. (see sidebar).

The national debate about the future of the humanities has special resonance for a state such as Maine that struggles with limited resources, but whose distinctive quality of place is enhanced by its historical richness, its long traditions in music and art, and the extensive literary works created by the many writers who have made Maine their home. The debate in the state reflects many of the conundrums with which the country continues to wrestle: How do we encourage the humanities while remaining attentive to the scarcity of resources? Where do policy and the humanities intersect? When “return on investment” language enters the discourse, how do we evaluate the humanities? When might it be imperative to move beyond a simple bottom-line calculation? And how can individual communities benefit from investment in the humanities, especially those in sparsely settled rural areas that sometimes seem distant from humanities resources? (See Jans 2015.) Such recurring questions are at the forefront of national debate on the value and future of the humanities and served as starting points for individual discussions with four policymakers who have distinctive experiences and perspectives on Maine state government and its relationship to the humanities. The complete list of ten framing questions that initiated these discussions is included at the end of this article.

UNIQUE PATHS INTO THE HUMANITIES

Each of these policy leaders followed a unique path into the humanities that informed her or his personal relationship to the humanities. Peter Mills pointed to his mother as a key contributor to his immersion in the

humanities. For 37 years, his mother taught high school English, and as Peter remarked, she brought that teaching home. She set high expectations for her children to become adept thinkers through their immersion in literature. Peggy Rotundo spoke of the continuing impact of her undergraduate humanities courses at Mount Holyoke College, including courses in the literature of centuries past, and described how these courses taught her to think deeply about difficult issues. Earle Shettleworth cited crucial experiences in his youth. During his teen years, following the destruction of Portland’s Union Station to make room for a mall, his consternation at the loss of the historic landmark fueled his devotion to saving historic buildings. As a high school student, he gave more than 100 public talks about the importance of historic preservation, doing so at a time when Americans had little commitment to saving the past. Tom Desjardin pointed to the powerful influence of his work at Gettysburg. He went there to do historical work as a summer job during graduate school and wound up staying more than two years. He found that the Civil War battle at Gettysburg—perhaps the most influential of that war and one of the most heralded war sites in U.S. history—was in many ways a Maine battle. Observing gravestones while walking across the burial grounds revealed that many of the combatants in this key struggle were Mainers. The experience of working at Gettysburg remains a motivational reminder to him of the penetrating importance of the humanities for Maine and the nation.

These policymakers have also found innovative ways to bring thoughtful attention to the humanities through their work. Rotundo and Mills have both helped to craft legislation that demands careful attention to the precise use of language, a skill honed through immersion in the humanities. Mills, in heading a state agency, reports that he continues to be surprised at the extent to which his reading of classic texts proves helpful in making difficult decisions, in framing issues, and in bringing broader perspectives to bear on current challenges. Desjardin, while working as a historian for the Department of Conservation, observed that our state’s

natural lands have often been the sites of major historical events, so he sought ways to bring these stories to the forefront in interpretive signage for the public. Shettleworth's commitment to strengthening historical literacy throughout the state—through teaching, public lectures, and service on boards—allows him to stress the importance inherent in historic buildings and landscapes in order to help future generations acquire an appreciation of the built environment across time. Through their varied activities, and in their own ways, these policymakers have both enlarged the place of the humanities in policy and have simultaneously drawn on the humanities to advance good policy.

Interestingly, the very experience of meeting in the policymakers' offices revealed their commitment to the humanities. For example, one wall of Desjardin's State House office features a classic painting of the Civil War

hero Joshua Chamberlain, while the opposite wall carries a facsimile of the U.S. Constitution. Desjardin described using images of the Constitution in his work with school children about the importance of knowing our nation's history and of the rights shared by all in a democracy, from the poorest to the richest. And on the walls of Shettleworth's conference room at the State Historical Preservation Commission, there are vivid posters showing the history of Maine's forts and Civil War monuments.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE HUMANITIES BUILDS A CAPACITY TO MAKE SENSE OF THE PRESENT

We tend to view the humanities as imbuing a respect for the past, but what these leaders reflected on is the degree to which knowledge of the humanities builds

Tom Desjardin is an American historian of the Civil and Revolutionary Wars. His numerous books include *Stand Firm Ye Boys From Maine: The 20th Maine and the Gettysburg Campaign* and *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory*. He earned his Ph.D. in history from the University of Maine. He has served as the historian for the Maine Department of Conservation and as senior advisor to the Maine governor. He is currently acting commissioner of the Maine Department of Education.



Peter Mills majored in literature at Harvard College and served five years on U.S. Navy destroyers, with several duty tours in Vietnam, for which he was awarded the Navy Achievement Medal. He later conducted intelligence missions about the Soviet Union. After graduating from the University of

Maine Law School in 1973, he worked as a lawyer, first in Portland and then in Skowhegan. He spent eight terms in the Maine legislature before becoming director of the Maine Turnpike Authority in 2011.



Margaret (Peggy) Rotundo is a major figure in the Maine House of Representatives and is currently cochair of the Legislature's Joint Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. A graduate in English from Mount Holyoke College, she is

director of Strategic and Policy Initiatives at the Bates College Harvard Center for Community Partnerships.



Earle G. Shettleworth Jr. is the Maine state historian and the state historic preservation officer. He earned a B.A. in art history from Colby College and an M.A. in architectural history from Boston University. His duties as state historian include enhancing the knowledge of Maine citizens about the state's history and heri-

tage, encouraging the teaching of Maine history in public schools, serving as a consultant to the governor and legislature on matters pertaining to history, and lecturing on topics of Maine history and historical preservation. A prolific author, his most recent book is *Homes Down East: Classic Maine Coastal Cottages and Town Houses*.

capacity to make sense of the present. They repeatedly cited their experiences in college, stressing that it was not just the content of what they learned, but also the ways in which they learned. Materials were deeply confronted and deeply analyzed. Mills contrasted his humanities immersion and its long and continuing reach with his more narrowly technical training in navigation in the Navy and its surprisingly short half-life. Important as that naval training was at the time, it is no longer relevant because the technology is now outdated. But his immersion in the humanities from decades ago remains relevant as he still draws on that experience when thinking through difficult issues. Rotundo talked about how her favorite course—on seventeenth-century poetry—was extremely demanding, but was instrumental in teaching her how to think critically. She pointed out that such courses move beyond self-evident facts, teaching students to be sensitive to underlying issues: How does one know what one knows? How can one be sure? What is the basis for one's claims? All four policy leaders noted that reading ancient history makes one realize the extent to which it is not ancient. The issues remain alive with relevance to the present. What the policymakers say about the impact that immersive study of classics can have on thinking is being confirmed by new educational research. Neuroscientists have begun working with literature and history scholars to test whether exposure to classics and historical content serves to strengthen and reshape the capacity for critical analysis (Kidd and Castano 2013). Rigorous studies are confirming that the study of classic literature is beneficial in this regard, indeed more so than the study of popular literature and culture.

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The interviewees unanimously agreed that the humanities are essential to teach one how to use language carefully. Reading words that are put together well helps create the self-discipline required for effective communication. Rotundo noted how important this is to crafting policy and legislation. An effective leader in

almost any walk of life, and especially in public policy, must use language clearly, forcefully, and without unintended effects. She reports using these skills every day in the Appropriations Committee. Mills spoke of a critical college course in poetry where the deep analysis peeled back like the papery skin of an onion to uncover layers and layers of meanings. He reported that what he learned about analytical thinking helped greatly in developing legislation. Recognizing that such skills are critical to our state, Rotundo emphasized the need to find ways to instill them in our future policymakers.

DEVELOPING SKILLS TO TAKE THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OTHER

Another point these policymakers emphasized is that the humanities can facilitate the development of skills to engage the perspective of the other. Being immersed in the humanities was crucial, in their estimation, in assisting them to develop empathy for others and learning not to demonize those who hold political and policy positions different from their own. Knowledge of the humanities helped them to grasp others' perspectives and to see how to work with these differing perspectives to advance the common good. They argued that such skills are central to effective policy making. If our aim as a state is to promote good policy making, then we need to ensure that our students receive in-depth exposure to the humanities. This does not happen all by itself, they reminded us, and we need to give considered attention as a state to how to make this happen.

We turned next to a question that has repeatedly been brought up in recent humanities debates, that of when children should be exposed to the humanities. Asked about how early to start familiarizing students with the humanities, our policymakers offered thoughtful responses. It is never too early, they argued, to expose young Mainers to the humanities, and we need to take advantage of every opportunity to do so. As Rotundo noted, children should learn history early or misunderstanding will fester. Mills said that the question is how best to build that knowledge.

The humanities, according to Desjardin, can give people an appetite for an essential lifelong quest to understand themselves and their world. In developing signage for historical sites, issues emerged about how best to support lessons to be used for school visits to the sites. Some people held that good signage for children inevitably requires oversimplification. In Desjardin's

experience, this was not the case. He found that creating displays that work for children was crucial because if they work for children, then they work for everyone else. He remarked that recent research on signage indicates that the messages should be concise because visitors on average will read only about 50 words before restlessness leads them to move on to the next sign. But that does not mean that only a reductionist story can be told. Instead, one needs to think innovatively about how to tell complex stories with relatively few words. He remarked on what can be learned from the expert communicators—the Shakespeares of the world—who were brilliant at understanding how people remember and use information. Desjardin pointed to Maine activities that have been effective in teaching the complexities of the humanities. He described history camps in Maine where the humanities are conveyed in skillful ways, and he cited the federal Teaching American History program that was implemented by the Maine Humanities Council to boost the quality and depth of historical training for students and K–12 teachers across the state.

THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF THE HUMANITIES

The discussions revealed that Maine policymakers have sometimes provided quiet leadership on policies that bring positive economic benefits from engagement with the humanities. Consider the contributions to Portland’s economy of the city’s preservation of beautiful old buildings. People are drawn to Maine partly because of its history, and the top-ten lists on which Portland so frequently appears often refer to the historic beauty of the city’s built environment. What is often forgotten, Shettleworth noted, is the seminal role that Maine Senator Edmund Muskie played in the writing and passage of the National Historic Preservation Act, legislation that has been essential to the preservation of numerous U.S. cities and their subsequent renaissance. Shettleworth recalls visiting Washington, D.C., as a youth and stopping by Muskie’s office where he was shown a draft of what would become the landmark preservation act. The passage of this legislation heightened the potential for links between the humanities and the economy, reminding us that the humanities are not abstract and remote from life in books, but are also about the ambient structures and daily activities of our communities that make life meaningful.

When it was mentioned to the interviewees that Maine is often viewed by out-of-staters as unusually successful in imbuing a sense of history among its citizenry, the policymakers dismissed the compliment with typical Maine modesty. Yet they went on to provide example after example that confirmed the strong involvement in the humanities by Mainers from all parts of the state. In Maine, individual towns—from Madawaska in the north to Kittery in south—have long been sites of activity in the humanities. Desjardin spoke of Mainers’ pride in Theodore Roosevelt’s essay “My Debt to Maine,” a tribute to the hardy denizens of Aroostook County, and in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s residence in Maine while writing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.¹ Shettleworth mentioned that historical societies are ubiquitous, and all of the interviewees noted that nearly every community can claim a famous historical figure or a significant incident that took place there. They commented that the humanities crop up all over the state, and individual communities routinely celebrate their forebears who contributed to them. Fittingly, they observed, the decentralized approach to government for which Maine is known is reflected in its approach to the humanities.

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THE HUMANITIES ARE NOT A LUXURY

In response to the notion that investment in the humanities is a luxury reserved for wealthy states or a private matter for wealthy individuals, the policymakers stressed the importance of every state cultivating the humanities within its borders. They reiterated that almost every small town in Maine can boast a famous person or event in history—one does not have to go to affluent communities to find history—and that the investment to highlight the humanities at the local level can yield immense returns. Such local lessons range widely. They include stories of how Mainers have created new technologies, impacted the abolition of

slavery, invented new methods of forestry and farming, and created new approaches to art and music. The policymakers pointed to the Maine Humanities Council and the outcomes it has achieved with modest funding (see Anderson 2015). The council's engagement with local communities to create meaningful humanities programming has had an enormous impact. Also cited as an example of cost-effective promotion of the humanities was the Maine Community Foundation, whose programs have shown what can be accomplished with modest grants, often funded by generous Maine patrons, that are carefully conceived and distributed widely across the state.

The policymakers repeatedly warned of the dangers of false dichotomies. The argument that poor states can ill afford investing in the humanities often builds upon the false assumption that job preparation and the humanities are somehow at odds with one another. Some argue for an exclusive focus on workforce training that leads directly to jobs. In this view, humanities are an unwarranted extravagance in the face of other urgent challenges. (See Cantor [2015] and Coughlin [2015] for counter arguments.)

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But the policymakers further point out that sharp dichotomies simplify what is an increasingly complex issue. They noted that the assumption that either-or choices must be made—such as between STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) and humanities—is no longer accurate. The world is changing in ways that belie the dichotomies. For example, STEM and the humanities are increasingly being blended, leading to the creation of jobs that call for an understanding of technical issues and of the humanities' ability to conceptualize, communicate, and implement creative solutions. The five articles in the digital humanities section of this issue provide compelling examples from this emerging field where many twenty-first-century jobs will require integrated knowledge and skills that are both technology and humanities based. In conservation work, Desjardin

pointed to the appearance of a whole new industry based on wayfinding, a field in which technology assists in the sophisticated design of trails and other physical spaces to understand how people respond to various characteristics when finding their way. Such developments have not escaped the attention of scholars. James Banner's monograph *Being a Historian* (2012) describes many of the new blended jobs, as does a recent issue of the journal *American Scholar* (Grafton and Grossman 2015) that highlights jobs that are now being obtained with humanities degrees. Innovative opportunities for jobs that blend technology and the humanities are destined to increase.

Noting that skills in both humanities and STEM will be needed in the emerging economy, the policymakers commented on how their positions and work reflect these blends. Desjardin emphasized that we increasingly live in a visual culture in which success requires multiple skills. His consulting work for the History Channel—in which the producers sought to create humanities content that was visual rather than written—called not only for deep knowledge of history, but also for an understanding of the technical features of visual media that produce viewer impact. Mills reported that, in his work overseeing engineers and planners as director of the Turnpike Authority, they do better at jobs in the long run when they bring humanities training as well as technical training to difficult practical challenges. Similarly, Shettleworth noted that decisions related to urban renewal are best handled by engineers and planners who have the crucial sense of perspective that the humanities help to instill during a well-rounded education, often at little additional expense in the training.

The interviewees also commented that the nature of work is changing, a phenomenon that has implications for moving beyond the false dichotomies of the past. Although work has been place-based in the past, it is increasingly possible with new technologies to work from any location. Instead of being exclusively focused on bringing bricks-and-mortar jobs to Maine, we must also turn our attention to creating rewarding places where people want to live and work—places that provide access not only to high tech resources but to life-enriching humanities (see Toner 2015). With a new information-age economy that makes work transportable, people are drawn to Maine for its long tradition of history, literature, art, music, and craftwork; in short, for its rich tapestry of the humanities and how it sustains valuable communities. In meeting Maine's

demographic needs, we can leverage its existing reservoir of humanities as well as welcome the contributions of new arrivals that will help the state continue to thrive in the future.

HUMANITIES IS DEEPLY ABOUT DEMOCRACY

In contrast to the stereotype of the humanities as an elitist enterprise—an erroneous reputation that our policymakers expressed concern about—all four interviewees pointed out that the humanities are ultimately and deeply about democracy. The common good is an essential quality for a successful and functioning democracy, and this is what unites the United States. For such a society to maintain itself and prosper we need to maintain a strong tradition of humanities. The policymakers repeatedly returned to this theme of the humanities and democracy. For example, it shows up in Maine’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, members of whom were asked to speak with students at Bates College. Rotundo reports that students there were perplexed why they knew so little about the history of Wabanaki people in Maine. Whether referring to Maine’s role in the Battle of Gettysburg, describing Portland’s historical markers at sites on the Underground Railroad, or talking about the ignoble history of the Ku Klux Klan holding its first U.S. daytime demonstration in Milo, we need to understand ourselves and our contemporary society in relationship to historical events that pivoted on fundamental issues that remain a constant element in human experience. To maintain a strong democracy, it is essential that we keep the humanities strong. And as these examples suggest, usable historical knowledge is not simply about nice history. The humanities are also about facing our past challenges and learning the difficult lessons they can teach us (see also Adams 2015).

What, finally, is the role of the humanities in a democracy? Earl Shorris, author of the critically acclaimed book *The Art of Freedom: Teaching the Humanities to the Poor* (2013), sheds light on this issue as he describes his search for how best to overcome the tragedy of poverty in an era of soaring global wealth. Shorris talked to many kinds of people, read widely in the research literatures, and observed many kinds of programs, all with the goal of understanding how to reduce poverty. To his

Framing Questions for Policymaker Interviews

1. Could you tell me a bit about your background and the ways that the humanities have been important to you?
2. Do you have any stories of how the humanities have played a role in your life? In your policy making?
3. Has your background in the humanities influenced in any way how you go about your policy making work or the perspective you take on that work?
4. Have you ever found that your commitment to the humanities and your work as a policymaker have come into conflict? If so, how have you found yourself addressing this conflict?
5. The state of Maine is often said to have an impressive history of leading in the humanities. Have you had a chance to give much thought to that history? Are there ways you see that history as holding important clues for how Maine might continue to lead in the humanities?
6. Much of the talk in Maine is about how we need to grow jobs and grow our economy. Do you see any place for the humanities within this discussion? Do you see any leadership role for Augusta in highlighting the importance of the humanities?
7. It has sometimes been asserted that as a country we can’t afford to invest in the humanities. Our limited resources should go to more pressing issues such as food and housing. If you were to provide guidance to policymakers struggling with this issue, what advice would you offer?
8. What role do you see government as potentially playing in encouraging the humanities (inside and outside schools)?
9. Maine is blessed with a wealth of volunteers—volunteers that contribute their time, resources, and energy—to the arts, music, and history. Our status as a humanities-rich place would be hard to maintain without our many volunteers. Do you see for policymakers in encouraging a commitment to and development of volunteers of all ages and all backgrounds?
10. Maine’s schools are an important place where students get exposed to the humanities. Do you see any ways that policymakers could be helpful in framing issues for schools that speak to the humanities?

surprise, the resounding answer came from a woman incarcerated in a maximum-security prison. She asserted that the difference between the rich and poor is the humanities. The book goes on to document how Shorris created an international movement that uses the teaching of the humanities to bring people out of poverty through education. According to him, the humanities teach people the skills of how to respond not to the specific moment but to imagine and plan for the opportunities and challenges of the larger world. He forcefully reminds us that the humanities cannot just be luxury goods for the elite if our modern human experiment in democracy is to continue to expand: “In a freezing village near the Bering Sea and in the Nahuatl-speaking heights above Mexico City, among the homeless of Seoul and the varieties of poverty in Chicago, in Africa and Argentina, I would come to understand the democracy of the humanities” (Shorris 2013: 15).

Shorris led the teaching of great works of literature and philosophy to dropouts, immigrants, and former prisoners. The result, he convincingly shows, is that the humanities are crucial to the future of democracy. The policymakers in Maine have demonstrated this by their example, and eloquently called attention to this same profound theme. The humanities in their varied and often contested forms have been and will continue to be an important contributor to the health of our democracy. 🐟

ENDNOTE

1. An image of Theodore Roosevelt’s original handwritten draft of his 1918 essay, “My Debt to Maine,” is available through Maine Memory Network <http://www.maine-memory.net/artifact/5997/zoom>

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Linda Silka is a social and community psychologist by training, with much of her work focusing on building community-university research partnerships. Silka was formerly director of the University of Maine’s Margaret

Chase Smith Policy Center and is now a senior fellow at the George Mitchell Center for Sustainability Solutions. Prior to coming to UMaine, she was a faculty member for three decades at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.