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Libraries and Changing Humanities Fields

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Libraries and Changing Humanities Fields

Peter Hesseldenz

Research and Innovation Day

February 14, 2024

Introduction

My Project:

- My project is to look at how Humanities fields are changing as they grapple with diversity and inclusion issues.
- I'd like to look at how curricula and teaching methods have changed over time to incorporate greater levels of diversity and equity.
- Then, I plan to look at how well (or not well) libraries are working with and supporting these changes.
- At this point, I plan to look specifically at the role that Academic Liaisons to Humanities programs can play. And perhaps suggest new and better ways that academic libraries might work in this changing environment.

Where did this idea come from?

- I became the Literature and Humanities Liaison in 2020 which was the year that George Floyd was murdered.
- In the wake of this tragedy, many institutions in the United States, including higher education, began to examine and more outwardly and overtly discuss the role they might be playing in structural and systemic inequity.
- As the Humanities Librarian, I became interested in the role that Humanities programs have played in maintaining and propping up older models centered on White, European, Anglo-Saxon culture. A couple things helped me along the way to plant these seeds.

In addition to a lot of reading, two Info Lit sessions informed my thoughts:

1. ENG 230 - Minority Literature
Framing of minority literature defined in terms of its relationship to majority literature.
Built in biases of the Library of Congress Classification system
2. PHI 270 - Modern Philosophy
Professor wanted to introduce some thinkers other than the usual European white males including women and people from non-western traditions.
A concrete example of trying to broaden and reframe the way we usually look at that period.
From a library perspective, it was interesting to see how difficult it was to find info on these other thinkers.

Quote:

- “Even as English departments have made tremendous strides within the forty years since I began graduate school, the aesthetic, historical, and cultural criteria by which departments determine whether some scholar, work, or practice can legitimately count as “English” remains remarkably consistent. The new courses, programs, approaches, and practices exist, generally speaking, as satellites, circling around a center of gravity known as a “core curriculum” weighted down by predominantly white authors and approaches that grow out of problematic—at best—principles of analysis that continue to structure the very logic of an English department.”

Jim Egan

What Have I Gotten Myself Into?

- After this, I really started looking at the issue – and it's, of course, much more complicated than I was originally aware of – not something you can easily grasp by reading an article or two.
- One thing that became very clear – while these issues had quickly come to dominate the national conversation – they weren't new. They are part of a long evolution in our thinking.
- Up until now, change has been slow and incremental -- but, people are now calling for quicker and more drastic changes.
- Those loud calls inevitably caused a backlash (which only makes this a more interesting and timelier project).

My Main Way of Looking at this

Three main areas of concentration (so far):

1. **Changes to Curricula**

- a. expansion of the canon – adding new, multicultural works that have not previously been widely studied
- b. reframing of the curriculum - so as to not center and normalize White/European thought.
- c. larger reliance on an interdisciplinary approach – the wider view often provides a more nuanced way of looking at an issue and a new basis for asking questions and recognizing bias.

2. **Changes to Teaching Methods**

- a. democratization of the classroom – a more collaborative relationship between student and professor, allowing for more marginalized voices to be heard. All are included – not just the most vocal.
- b. A lessening of the top-down, hierarchical relationship between professor and student. Student experiences are incorporated into the lessons and discussions, allowing new ideas to emerge.

3. **Examining the library's role**

- a. how are we complicit in maintaining the old system?
- b. what structural biases do we have in the way that we collect, as well as the ways we teach and interact with our users?

My Approach

- Now, I have an oral history project!
- What started as a long, solitary exploration of these issues has evolved into a project where I will be getting out and interviewing Humanities professors at UK (and possibly other Kentucky institutions) about these issues.
- I'm currently working on my IRB (thanks Jay Marie and Taylor) and learning how to do oral history (thanks Doug and Jen)

Conclusion

Why project is this important to me?

Because the Humanities are important -- perhaps more important than ever, today.

The Humanities fields are uniquely positioned to address the issues of inequity that exist today.

In the past, we've turned to legal remedies (Voting Rights Act, Affirmative Action) and socio/political remedies (using data to point out structural inequities in housing, education, healthcare, etc.). These approaches have been valuable in the past.

However, today's racism and inequities are harder to fight with those methods -- because today's racism is largely (but not completely) subtle and invisible. It's baked into the system and, often, we don't notice it.

Humanities, in the form of novels, plays, films, poetry, philosophical and historical writing, can delve into the human stories -- and look at the "desires, anxieties, memories and the feelings that lie beneath rational consciousness" (Koshy 1545) -- and perhaps give us powerful insight into these problems and new ways of confronting them.