

# Maine Policy Review

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Volume 24  
Issue 1 *Humanities and Policy*

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2015

## The Fabulous Promise and Practical Need for the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century

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### Recommended Citation

Riordan, Liam. "The Fabulous Promise and Practical Need for the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century." *Maine Policy Review* 24.1 (2015) : 12 -17, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol24/iss1/3>.

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# The Fabulous Promise and Practical Need for the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century

by Liam Riordan, Guest Editor

Contributors to this special issue of *Maine Policy Review* were asked to write original articles that would help readers to become more aware of a wide range of outstanding humanities programs in Maine and how public policy and the humanities relate to one another in the state. For some authors this was a clear and simple request, but it made most of them stop and think hard: these two important areas—public policy and the humanities—are too often considered as separate from one another. Where policy is primarily associated with local, state, and federal government, the humanities are mostly considered the domain of certain departments in colleges and universities. Although public policy and the humanities certainly don't overlap completely, this *MPR* issue explores how much we have to gain from emphasizing the connections between the two realms and how much each can gain from deepening their engagement with one another.

In this overview article, I explore the relationship between the humanities and policy in general terms, identifying the recurring themes in the articles that follow. I contend that the humanities offer fabulous promise to enrich the quality of civic life in Maine (and across the nation) and that this promise is firmly rooted in how the humanities address our practical need for meaningful human experiences. This is particularly the case in a state where residents value collegial civic life and where individual and small-group action can have a direct impact, and because the quality of place that most of us cherish, and hope to pass on to our children, is deeply rooted in both the humanities and policy. To fulfill this promise, however, the humanities need to be supported by thoughtful public policy, and humanities professionals need to be more fully aware of what policy leaders need to craft better and more sustainable public programs.

A practical discussion of the humanities and their relationship with public policy necessarily begins with the basic question of what the term *humanities* means. At their roots, the humanities grow from a need to understand what it means to be human. As the sidebar

explores further, the humanities emphasize the *qualitative* dimensions of human experience. The humanities help us to uncover the distinctive attributes that make us unique in our individual values, our need for story telling, and our longing for collective purpose. As the screenwriter and filmmaker George Lucas has commented, “the sciences are the how, and the humanities are the why. Why are we here, why do we believe in the things that we believe in? I don't think that you can have the how without the why.”<sup>1</sup>

The humanities tradition in the Western world has a deep historical connection with the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome and the revival of the classics during the Renaissance. In this meaning, the humanities hold an essential place in intellectual life and a foundational position in the academic disciplines of history, literature and poetry, philosophy, the study of languages, and creative expression of all sorts (visual, musical, and the performing arts). Yet, ultimately, the humanities bear most importantly upon public policy in the manner in which they enhance our everyday lives and our connections with one another. As our post-industrial society develops in ways that make big data increasingly accessible, our need to use that data effectively and to assess its quality and validity is ever more crucial. The imperatives of our digital present have only increased our urgent need to deploy the critical thinking skills honed by the humanities so that we more fully understand ourselves in relationship to one another. Herein lies both the fabulous promise of the humanities and also our practical need for them.

It has been my great pleasure to serve as the guest editor of this special humanities-themed issue of *Maine Policy Review*. Discussions about how we might shape this issue began at least as long ago as the spring of 2013, and the conversation emerged from my sense of crisis: the humanities were increasingly being described as a superfluous luxury that merited little priority based upon (supposedly) pragmatic bottom-line strategic thinking. Such ideas still circulate in some leading policy circles, perhaps most dramatically in Wisconsin, where

the governor's 2015 budget slashed funding for the public university system and also called for replacing "the search for truth" in the university's mission with "meeting the state's work-force needs."<sup>2</sup>

The tragedy of this position is that public higher education in the United States has set a pioneering global standard precisely because it combines practical and technical education with a commitment to enduring ideals and foundational critical thinking and communication skills. To repurpose a familiar phrase from the MasterCard ad campaign that has now run for 17 years in 200 countries, "the humanities are priceless; for everything else there's job training." This is not to disparage job training, nor to dismiss the real need for education in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields, but in the rush to be practical, we must not lose sight of the enormous value and limitless potential for growth that the humanities offer to those who pursue a qualitative understanding of the human condition. As Steve Jobs has famously noted, "it's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough—that it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our hearts sing."<sup>3</sup>

We still need to defend the humanities, and they are still far too distant from public policy, but I am more hopeful now than I was two years ago when planning for this *MPR* issue began. I believe that the humanities' essential role to advance the common good is becoming more widely recognized. Already in Maine, the pendulum of social development and policy commitments has begun a return arc from a harsh anti-humanities apogee toward a point of equilibrium. This pendulum swing partially reflects the gradually improving economy, as we slowly turn the corner on the consequences of the Great Recession.

My knowledge of the varied humanistic endeavors in Maine and their quality and positive impact grew exponentially as a result of planning and editing this issue, and my ability to be an effective guest editor was really made possible by my experiences as a member of the board of directors of the Maine Humanities Council (MHC), which I joined in 2010. Serving as a faculty member in the University of Maine's Department of History since 1997, I was proud of my campus unit as the only Ph.D.-granting department in the humanities in the state of Maine. However, I also worried about the thinness of the commitment to the humanities in public higher education in Maine. The graduates of our

### What Are the Humanities?

The humanities spring from the qualitative aspects of human experience. What are our values, and where do they come from? How can we share our understanding with one another and grow in the process? This emphasis gives the humanities vital significance for individual development and prosperous communities. As our post-industrial and information-age society continues to develop, the cognitive skills based in the humanities are more important for our future than ever.

In a scholarly setting, the humanities involve the study of history, literature and poetry, philosophy, and languages. Extended into our daily lives, the humanities are the empowering tools for insight, reflection, and experience that give our lives meaning.

The humanities embrace the visual and performing arts, and they are fundamental to how we communicate about our endeavors in any arena. The humanities must be nourished because they are essential for individual fulfillment, engaged citizenship, and the common good.

program play key roles in cultural organizations across the state, but our solo doctoral position with declining faculty numbers alarmed me.

Through my work for the MHC, I began to learn more about the humanities landscape in Maine from a perspective outside of the university, and I was confronted by two somewhat contradictory discoveries. On the one hand, I learned about the truly extraordinary statewide programs of the MHC, the independent state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The small staff of the MHC provides an extraordinary model of how a nimble and lean organization can deliver enormous impact. In my five-year association with the MHC, it has undergone significant changes in staff and leadership that were marked by a near perfect blend of continuity with past achievements and embracing the changes necessary to remain a national leader among state NEH affiliates.

One example will have to suffice to convey how the MHC lives up to its ambitious vision statement—"Maine communities transformed by the power and pleasure of

ideas.” This extraordinary moment arose while listening to presentations by members of a discussion group for women living in a halfway house as they exited the state prison system. Their shared discussions of books for emerging readers helped them to rebuild a sense of self, family, and community through the reflection and exchange encouraged by reading and facilitated discussions. The repeated testimony by these women about the impact of the MHC’s New Books, New Readers program on their lives was extraordinary, and in several cases it was extended through sharing their new books with their own young children. This was as profound an example of the pricelessness of the humanities, and the importance of face-to-face small group work, as I can imagine. For more about such transformative moments, I encourage you to read David Richards’ (2015) article that draws on his extraordinary experience guiding such discussion series in central and western Maine.

**This MPR issue exemplifies the kind of community engagement that is central to maintaining and expanding the quality of the humanities in Maine.**

At the same time that I was learning more about the public humanities through joining the MHC board, I also gained a new perspective on the University of Maine and its humanities resources. Now looking from the outside in, I saw the UMaine campus as a much more towering asset for the humanities in the state. The level of expertise among faculty and staff, the quality of the students, the resources of Fogler Library, the basic infrastructure of a historic campus with many modern and renovated spaces for learning and sharing—all of it broadly accessible to Maine residents as a result of the Morrill Land Grant Acts—make the university simply without peer in Maine. From my new vantage point, I now see a strong need for faculty like me who are privileged to work at UMaine to collaborate with the public to ensure that the humanities grow more central to the civic life of our state as a whole.

Widespread agreement about this responsibility led faculty, administrators, staff, and students in UMaine’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2010 to begin to explore ways to better coordinate the work done by 16 humanities-based departments and units on the Orono campus, which has resulted in the creation of the University of Maine Humanities Center (UMHC). Supported by grant-based resources and private fundraising, the UMHC has a three-part mission: to support lifelong education, faculty and student research, and community engagement.

These missions clearly overlap. For example, the *Historical Atlas of Maine* (University of Maine Press, 2015) has established a new national standard for how text, historical artifacts and images, and contemporary maps can be combined to explain the past from the Ice Age through the end of the twentieth century. Led by historical geographer Stephen Hornsby and historian Richard Judd, a team of more than 30 scholars, including undergraduate and graduate students, has made an extraordinary research contribution (see Hornsby 2015). Not only does the *Atlas* represent a stunning scholarly and teaching accomplishment, it built on a huge range of institutional partnerships, above all with the Osher Map Library at the University of Southern Maine. Major grant support from NEH, the Maine State Legislature, the University of Maine, the University of Maine System, the Bernard Osher Foundation, and four additional leading federal and private sources sustained the project for more a decade. The next phase is to begin to explore how the print *Atlas* can inform the creation of an interactive digital atlas with the same national-caliber research and innovation that the print version has achieved.

The work of the UMHC goes forward on many fronts and with many projects that can be followed on our website (<http://umaine.edu/umhc/>) and on our Facebook page. Not the least of these endeavors is the central role that the UMHC played in bringing this issue of the *MPR* to the public. This issue exemplifies the kind of community engagement that is central to maintaining and expanding the quality of the humanities in Maine. Where an older model of public service sometimes implied a hierarchical relationship between universities and the public, this issue of the journal highlights how the UMHC is transcending such boundaries to engage individuals, institutions, and communities across Maine as collaborative partners. The humanities offer their greatest promise not as pure

knowledge dispensed, but as an engaged process of dialogue marked by flexibility and growth.

The deep human impulse to make meaning, to share it with others, to improve our understanding through such exchanges, and ultimately, to create a better future is the promise that the humanities extends to all of us and for which we have a strong collective need. The two keynote essays that open this special issue skillfully frame what's at stake. As NEH Chairman William "Bro" Adams aptly notes, democratic citizenship requires an ability to think critically, exchange ideas, and imagine alternatives (2015). The humanities are essential to these activities, and while these skills are inherent to human nature, they also must be nurtured.

Jonathan Fanton, American Academy of Arts & Sciences president, makes a similar point in his essay when he quotes from the introduction to the "Heart of the Matter" report: the essential values of American civic life "are not born, but taught" (Fanton 2015). Furthermore, the kind of teaching that we most need is not by the stern expert expounding certainties, but by sharing our "broader educational resources and the complete network of intersecting institutions that together shape the development of independent thought." The independent thought that was the hallmark of Senator Margaret Chase Smith's leadership is also the core asset that the humanities offer to public policy in twenty-first century Maine.

The 34 articles and essays in this issue, written by 38 authors, reflect the range of humanities institutions that sustain independent thought in the state. Although we could have included many other valuable authors, topics, and institutions, what we have gathered in this issue showcases some of the most exciting developments in the humanities in the state, developments that can inform policymakers so they can better deploy the humanities to improve everyday lives. Twelve articles by faculty and staff from the University of Maine make a major contribution, and they are joined by authors from private colleges, other campuses in the University of Maine System, a high school teacher, and a community college president. Crucially, these perspectives from teaching institutions share space with authors from cultural organizations, libraries, state government, and the MHC. These rich points of view are perhaps most engaging at the moments when they cross boundaries with one another, share common concerns, and look to create our best possible future through respectful cooperation that doesn't ignore

important differences of opinions in the complex and messy world of crafting policy.

The six thematic sections that follow group authors and topics in ways that allow each theme to be considered from multiple viewpoints. The opening section—"Humanities and Education"—includes discussion of programs in philosophy, poetry, and history for middle and high school students, poignant assessments of the meaning of the humanities for college students (and their teacher) and retirees, and the humanities' unanticipated contributions to social understanding. One article considers the classic question faced by most humanities undergraduates—"What are you going to do with that major?"

There is indeed overlap between the essays in the first section and those in the second section—"Public Humanities"—for few teachers regard their classrooms as separate from the broader context in which they live and work. Given the MHC's commitment to enhancing the public humanities in Maine since its creation in 1975, not surprisingly authors of three of the five articles in this section have played leadership roles in this organization. Yet if the MHC is a well-established leader in the field, its tenure pales next to what may be the most

**The humanities offer their greatest promise not as pure knowledge dispensed, but as an engaged process of dialogue marked by flexibility and growth.**

beloved of all humanities institutions—the public library. These hubs for meaningful civic life come in all shapes and sizes in Maine. They provide the essential infrastructure for the humanities, through books, magazines, DVDs, and CDs, as places to access online databases, and as hosts for humanities activities of all kinds. Libraries may be the most popular and most ubiquitous humanities organizations in Maine, but museums, archives, and historical societies also contribute enormously to the network of intersecting institutions that make the public humanities so dynamic in Maine.

The exploration of the humanities in education and their thorough integration into public life beyond the classroom directly informs the next four sections of this issue, starting with six diverse articles in the section “Maine’s Quality of Place.” As globalization threatens to increase cultural homogenization, the unique connotations that Maine conjures are an increasingly valuable asset, and one that the humanities has helped create and will continue to nurture. The articles cover topics ranging from the need for a deeper understanding of the potential of cultural tourism, to the double-edged sword of being branded a “Maine artist,” to the place of the sea and its resources for Maine’s way of life, and each places the humanities at its analytic center.

Though the humanities are widespread and vigorous in Maine, they are also a fragile set of relationships that must be nourished if they are to continue to thrive. Four articles in the “What Supports the Humanities?” section take up this question from several perspectives: we hear from legislators and others with experience in state government, learn about the amazing tradition of collaboration among Maine’s cultural organizations, become more aware of the crucial role that volunteers play in advancing the humanities. Reversing the usual way that the relationship between public policy and the humanities is framed, the final article in this section probes how the humanities can better support policy.

The last two sections of the issue—“Digital Humanities” and “Maine in the Global Age”—look to the future, first with five articles about the digital humanities, an elusive and all-embracing term. Digital humanities nonetheless represents the most significant area of growth in the humanities in the past decade. Authors include scholars, archivists, librarians, and leaders of cultural organizations who examine their specific location in the rapidly expanding digital humanities universe. Articles consider how to grapple with big data; how we preserve and maintain the technology of past eras (from celluloid to predigital audio recordings); and the innovative collaborations that lie at the heart of the Maine Memory Network’s pioneering use of the Internet as a tool for local history.

The “Maine in the Global Age” section closes the issue. The final article, on the growing presence of Muslims in Maine, assesses recent migration and new forms of cultural diversity. The other two articles remind us that the particular challenges of this new subject have deep roots and raise perennial questions about diversity, language, and living in a multicultural borderland. All

these qualities have shaped the reality of life in our region from the pre-colonial world of Native American differences, through an era of Protestant and Catholic religious, as well as English and French linguistic, and cultural differences. Understanding the full meaning of Maine’s relationship to globalization and unleashing the state’s fullest potential in this context can only be accomplished by examining the many ways that we have faced such challenges in the past. Assessing this record of human experience and grappling with successes, failures, and ambiguous and uncertain outcomes are among the most essential ways that the humanities and public policy need to learn from one another.

The original articles written for this special issue of the *Maine Policy Review* aspire to inform readers about the broad parameters of the humanities in Maine, to excite them about the rich work that is being done here, and to suggest that much still needs to be undertaken. Even more important, it is our collective hope that these articles inspire you, our readers, to renew your participation in the humanities, which is best done by sharing your curiosity, surprise, and wonder with others. Engaging in open-ended and informed dialogue with one another remains a necessary practice for all of us to express our humanity and to create the kind of society in Maine that can make our unofficial state slogan, “the way life should be,” ring true. 🐟

#### ENDNOTE

1. Quoted in “The Heart of the Matter” video, produced for the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, online at <https://vimeo.com/68662447>
2. The attack on the humanities is a bipartisan affair that may have been initiated by governors like Scott Walker (R-Wisconsin), Rick Scott (R-Florida), and Patrick McCrory (R-North Carolina), but the idea that the humanities somehow detract from U.S. economic vitality has also been expounded by President Obama. On developments in Wisconsin, see [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/16/opinion/save-the-wisconsin-idea.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/16/opinion/save-the-wisconsin-idea.html?_r=0). For a national overview, see <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/31/obama-becomes-latest-politician-criticize-liberal-arts-discipline>
3. Quoted in [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-stem-wont-make-us-successful/2015/03/26/5f4604f2-d2a5-11e4-ab77-9646eea6a4c7\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-stem-wont-make-us-successful/2015/03/26/5f4604f2-d2a5-11e4-ab77-9646eea6a4c7_story.html)

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