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In the Belly of the Beast: Service and the Future of the Public Humanities

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Abstract

In this piece we argue for the revolutionary power of collective and collaborative work through the most maligned aspect of academic labour: service. The co-authors are the heads of academic units at Concordia University, who in fall 2023 organized a coalition of unit heads from across their university who worked collectively to push for greater budget transparency. Their experience challenges the false paradigm that would identify the “public humanities” exclusively with academic research and teaching, to show how service to one’s unit, faculty, and university is an important site of resistance, activism, and struggle. Done with intention and by modelling democratic and collective processes, service is not only a form of resistance to the erosion of any thinking and doing that is not under the thrall of capitalism, but it is also a way of enacting the public humanities themselves, through thinking, writing, talking and working out ideas together, a potential site for creating intellectual life by co-opting bureaucracy to creative and political ends.

Keywords: academic governance; austerity; equity; service; institutions

While modern universities have always taken many forms that have evolved over time, historians who study their origins generally tie their emergence to the moment when a pope or emperor gave them the right to confer licenses to teach (*licentiae docendi*) that were licenses *ubique docendi*, to teach wherever in the Christian world one wished to teach.¹ This international applicability of university degrees – which empower our graduates to use their learning anywhere – remains central to the academic mission of the university, and it is presumed by our internationally focused metrics for assessing the prestige and value of our work. But it’s also a direct consequence of the university’s development as a tool for facilitating the spread of empire. And though the university has evolved considerably in the last eight hundred years, it hasn’t evolved past that original purpose of preparing qualified bureaucrats to be deployed wherever they are necessary.

¹ Verger 1992, 36.

This history is an important context for our starting definition of the “public” humanities, in opposition to their more institutional form. Countless words have been published decrying the crisis in the humanities in academia and the challenge of finding a way forward in the current context of austerity, of ideological attacks on higher education, and of neoliberal and market-driven conceptions of the university.² We believe that the public humanities should contribute to these major discussions by asking: what would happen to the university if it sought its sustenance and purpose from local communities? What forms of work would it prioritize, and how would it evolve to reflect its new priorities? We believe there is a political value to imagining our “public” to be local and situated, setting aside the ceremonial and international “gown” to engage with the needs and concerns of the nearby “town.” In this short piece, we will discuss one obvious starting point for encouraging engagements with the publics, which is to restructure the incentivization of academic labor by abandoning the old threefold division of research, teaching, and service. By thinking of this labor in an integrated way, we commit ourselves to a more engaged and collaborative vision of academia, where we will work together and take care of each other. Below, we offer one brief example from our own experience, as a starting point for modeling what this new university might look like.

We come to this discussion from very different, but surprisingly complementary, disciplinary orientations. As a medieval literature scholar, Stephen has spent much of his career studying institutional histories and the political implications of their strategies for narrativizing their evolution in terms of historical periods.³ As an oral historian, Anna has long based her research in questions of how to listen, how to work collaboratively, and how to do research that serves communities.⁴ We met when we both became department chairs at Concordia University in Montreal, and we realized how much power and potential there was in our roles. At this intersection of the history of institutions and institutionalization and the practice of listening and community, we argue that a meaningful engagement with a truly public humanities that brings the university closer to communities and serves diverse publics better would place academic service at the center, and not the periphery, of academic life.

As is so often the case, our views on this question first crystallized in a moment of crisis. In November 2023, as our union CUFA was renegotiating our collective agreement, Concordia’s Provost Anne Whitelaw announced a startling increase in the projected deficit, three times the size of the deficit that she had projected in the May budget presentation. To address this new situation, she said that major budget cuts would be applied parametrically across the university, with the same 7.8% reduction of spending in academic programs and in non-academic branches like Human Resources, Instructional and Information Technology Services, and the Offices of the President and Provost. Given the structure of our budget, there was no way to imagine how spending cuts of this magnitude could be enacted without going through salaries, and in particular through the salaries of our most contingent and vulnerable community members. More to the point, we did not see how the deficit had increased so dramatically in only a matter of months, and so we did not understand the rationale for such extreme measures.

Since the winter of 2022, a group of chairs and principals from the Faculty of Arts and Science have made a practice of socializing regularly, both to build solidarity across disciplines and to

² See, for example, Butler 2022; Douglass 2021; Macfarlane 2021; Mintz 2021; Reitter and Wellmon 2023.

³ Most recently in the forthcoming volume *Chaucer’s Problem of Prose: Media, History, and the Canterbury Tales*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. On the politics of periodization, see also Brylowe and Yeager 2021; Yeager 2021; Yeager 2019. On institutional histories, see also Yeager 2011, 2014, 2018. Ideas similar to those expressed in this article appear also in Yeager 2020.

⁴ See, for example, Sheftel 2018; Sheftel and Zembrzycki 2010, 2013, 2017.

seek front-line expertise from other unit heads for addressing the emergent challenges that faced unit heads in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown. When the news about the deficit was announced, we organized a series of small get-togethers that culminated in a meeting for any concerned unit heads who wished to discuss our situation. Almost every single unit head from our faculty attended the meeting, and when it was completed, we co-authored a letter to the board of governors listing a series of questions about the increase to the deficit that we wanted the Provost and the CFO to address in an in-person meeting with all the unit heads from all four faculties. The Provost agreed to our request, and in the meeting we learned that the new, larger deficit projection was mostly a longer-term projection of what the deficit could become if current spending was not curtailed. The reason we did not understand how the situation had changed was that the situation had not changed at all, it had only been presented differently. In the meeting, the Provost also promised to revisit the parametric structure of the proposed cuts, and in May of the following year, she announced that in the short term at least, the cuts would come more from the non-academic sector than the academic sector.

Every one of our colleagues we have spoken to about these efforts and their pay-off has told us that they have never seen nor heard of comparable solidarity among academic unit heads at any university or college where they have worked or studied, or at the institutions of their collaborators and friends. This is not surprising, given that academic institutions are typically designed to prevent such solidarity: asking why academic departments don't work together more often is like asking why the children forced to fight each other in *The Hunger Games* didn't get along better when they had so much in common.⁵ Yet our collaborations among unit heads have been hugely beneficial to all of our individual programs, with a very little effort. All it took were some nachos, mozzarella sticks, and frank discussions of our situations to make it clear to all of us that we were in the same dire position, which was best navigated when we worked together. Our community of chairs found ourselves successfully defending the academic and teaching mission of the university, the humanities, and the value of engaged scholarship rather than just market-based metrics, and we were able to do so simply because we started talking to each other.

There is a healthy literature that points out how service tasks, particularly tasks that receive little to no recognition, fall disproportionately to female, non-binary, and racialized scholars.⁶ One solution to this is, of course, to consciously divide service labor more widely and equitably and to fight the implicit biases that allow some to not only get away with doing less but also see their careers advance more quickly as a result. While we agree that such efforts are worthwhile, we reject the implicit framing that the ethical motive behind such divisions is the sharing of unpleasant tasks, as when roommates use a schedule to determine which night each of them will wash the dishes. Instead, we propose another complementary solution, which is to better incentivize service tasks by recognizing that they are not only intrinsically important but also intrinsically interesting and rewarding, perhaps especially when they are unpleasant. Instead of trying to fix the system so that everyone can "achieve" as historically dominant people have been able to "achieve," we could – with less effort, and to the greater benefit of our institutions and the communities they serve – rethink our model of achievement to one that is more inclusive, caring, and interdependent.⁷ If service were properly respected and remunerated, it would be easier to find folks willing to do it, and the folks who demonstrate ability and interest in that area would be less overburdened by the need to supplement their successes with other successes in other forms of labor that have been more legible to tenure and promotion committees.

⁵ Collins 2008.

⁶ Hanasono et al. 2019; Miller and Roksa 2020.

⁷ Altan-Olcay and Bergeron 2022; Burton 2021.

The powerful resistance among academics to such common-sense refigurations of our labor is all the more puzzling given the powerful external pressures pushing us in directions that already make sense on their own intrinsic merits. But while there are numerous external threats, they also manifest themselves internally, through administrative bloat, through boards of governors that lack accountability, through the increasing reliance on consultants to make decisions about how universities ought to be run, and through top-down make-work projects that do little to speak to faculty and student realities. Labor unions have been on the front lines of protecting academic freedom and the continued relevance of the humanities, and certainly, we are very proud to be faculty at a university with a strong history of collective bargaining. However, the issues at stake go beyond labor to our collective vision of that labor's purpose, to what we want our profession to be.⁸

The individualism of the academy is deeply ingrained; the CV rules all. If we want to be successful in collective opposition to attacks on the Humanities, and if we want to imagine a more engaged and engaging version of the university, then we need to find ways to build a sense of collective fate into the structures of our institutions. If universities were to formally recognize that teaching, research, and service are all aspects of one category of caring for knowledge and the people who engage with it, then we would be called to work to push for accountability in our institutions internally, while also spreading our ideas and research externally. Imagine if rather than “research statements” in promotion files, we were encouraged instead to think more broadly about what we have contributed to our university and to the community that surrounds it. Imagine if we incentivized collective authorship and work that does not involve an author by-line; what if we made all of these things count? We could measure our successes for how our work to create, share, and facilitate new knowledge contributes to our diverse communities, rather than merely to the building of our own careers.

Certainly, this is an obvious starting point for developing tactics that might resist the politics of reactionary and conservative forces, which often frame faculty demands as unrealistic while taking advantage of crises for their own ends. The public humanities is well positioned to serve as a place for articulating how these crises could be a moment of rethinking our ethical and political commitment to each other, as a starting point for collective action. We could work together to save something that is actually worth saving. After all, what do we have to lose?

Anna Sheftel is Principal and Associate Professor in the School of Community and Public Affairs at Concordia University. She is an oral historian of genocide, migration, and activism. Her most well-known publication is *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, co-edited with Stacey Zembrzycki, which won the Oral History Association's (OHA) 2014 Book Award. Her current Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded project explores a mysterious little Jewish cemetery in Montreal.

Stephen Yeager is Professor in the English Department at Concordia University. His research at the intersection of medieval and media studies examines the interconnection between literary form and institutional history. His articles have appeared in journals like *Critical Inquiry*, *English Language Notes*, *The Journal for Medieval and Early-Modern Studies*, and *The Chaucer Review*. His latest monograph *Chaucer's Problem of Prose: Media, History, and The Canterbury Tales* is forthcoming from University of Toronto Press.

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⁸ See, for example, the relentless organizing being done by the United Faculty of Florida, resisting the “stop woke” politics of the De Santis government: <https://myuff.org>.

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