

University of Washington | English Department Graduation Ceremony | June 7, 2017 | 2pm
Speaker: Rachel Arteaga

Thank you. It is an honor to be here today, among colleagues and friends, to celebrate with great joy the impressive accomplishments of those who are graduating from programs at all levels and in all areas of specialization in the English Department at the University of Washington. We have come here this afternoon to acknowledge your hard work and to give much-deserved recognition to the many contributions that you have made to this institution. We do this in the presence of your families and loved ones—the people who have made your journeys possible.

Events such as this lend themselves to a sense of an ending. But I would caution you against embracing that with too much certainty. As the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska writes, “certainty is beautiful, but uncertainty is more beautiful still,” and we never know where we will go, or to which places we might return. I will confess that I am astonished to find myself on this stage for not a second, but, yes, a third time, having previously walked across it to receive undergraduate and graduate degrees here. Given that ceremonies like this one are all about departures, these fine people are undoubtedly wondering when I’m going to *leave* this institution.

All jokes aside, there is a simple answer to the question of what I’m still doing here: my life’s work is in what we call the humanities—broadly defined by the college as the study of and “engagement with texts, languages, history, culture, and civilization”—and the University of Washington is one of the very best places in the world to pursue that work. All of you who are graduating today can be proud to know that you will always be affiliated with, and, much more importantly, shaped by, this standard of excellence. Whether you come from a background of

vast privilege or you are the first in your family to earn a college degree, that standard is the same, and you have reached it. No one can ever take that away from you.

If we were to ask all of our graduates today what their plans are for their next steps, we would surely hear a wide range of plausible and interesting answers. This is because with a strong background in the humanities, there are essentially no limits to what you can go on to do. Data show that undergraduate English majors often pursue careers in education, law, government, and business. They are, as we speak, at work at various locations across the public and private sectors. And by all accounts, they do their work effectively and they lead: it is customary now to mention that while starting salaries for humanities majors are often lower than their peers in other areas of study, by the end of their careers, they put up very competitive numbers on the earnings scoreboard—for what that's worth. So you see, when you major in a humanities discipline and then keep an open mind about your prospects, you're setting yourself up to have the best of all worlds.

This holds true at the masters and doctoral levels as well: throughout the history of the profession, by which I mean the academic study of, for example, literature, conducted through humanistic inquiry and research that often ultimately takes the form of the scholarly book, those who have attained the high distinction of the PhD have pursued many paths. In other words, for as long as the modern academy has been producing PhDs in English, it has been sending them into working lives both within and beyond the ivory tower and the college classroom. And so, whether they become professors in universities, liberal arts colleges, or community colleges; or high school teachers; or administrative professionals; or whether they do their work in business,

non-profit, or government, PhDs apply their advanced training in the humanities to the vital tasks of cultural preservation and circulation, scholarship, teaching, and the construction of social and educational infrastructure for the next generation. From their excellence in scholarship and teaching to the range of capabilities they bring to programs and partnerships that cross institutional contexts, such as prison higher education and high school dual-enrollment, truly in every sense, our PhDs are leaders.

Why do these diverse career outcomes matter so much? I will speak briefly today about what the Modern Language Association, the organization best-known as the arbiter of citation formatting, but which also has many other essential functions, calls “the humanities workforce.” My point in detailing the many possible trajectories of our students is to argue with the MLA that all of these graduates and those who have gone before them labor together in a common field, no matter where they do their work, what their titles are, or how they self-identify professionally. By the end of your career, you may solidly claim that you are a businesswoman, or a writer, or a father, and more power to you for that. But I hope that I can convince you today to also, within these roles, conceptualize yourselves as members of the humanities workforce. As David Laurence, the scholar who coined the term, notes, while the idea of a science and engineering workforce is well established, a coherent idea of a humanities workforce, has yet to take hold – and this is in part because its members do not generally use any such term to describe themselves. Yet, such an idea could powerfully inform public policy and public perception of what it is that we all do, and point with confidence and precision to the value of that work for society.

To be more explicit, I'll quote from Laurence's work. As he makes clear, it is not the letters after your name but rather the substance of your work that make you a part of the humanities workforce. He writes:

“We may usefully think of humanities workers as a segment of knowledge workers. They are those who investigate or manipulate the nonquantitative symbolic phenomena characteristic of humans as language-bearing, meaning-seeking beings. Humanities work calls on educated skill with the grammatical, rhetorical, and dramatic properties through which artifacts and social actions become invested with meaning. Questions about value, purpose, meaning, and belief typically belong to the humanities because in both aesthetic and moral matters determinations of value and judgments of better or worse are typically expressed in ways that cannot be quantified. Humanities workers deploy knowledge and skill sets developed through disciplined encounter with cultural objects, both past and present, and draw on traditions of scholarly inquiry that have developed around such encounters.”

I find Laurence's arguments convincing. It seems to me that his description of the work done professionally in the humanities across many sites of employment is fundamentally accurate. I can see the importance, for all of us who do this kind of work, to have at hand an overarching concept of a single workforce distributed across many locations—especially because such a concept can help us to organize our identities and practices around a professional community that is larger than the university. Laurence even makes a compelling claim that “the functioning of key cultural institutions and significant sectors of the national economy depends on the continued development and reproduction of humanistic talent and expertise,” and in doing so he

safeguards his arguments about the value of the nonquantifiable in the fortress of the most explicitly quantifiable: the idea that our work sustains the very economy.

Yet, the idea of the humanities workforce does not necessarily require us to care about who, exactly, benefits from the various activities we undertake. Certainly, the value of the humanities to the public is strongly implied by the examples Laurence chooses to include. And he openly advocates for public support of the humanities, both through federal funding and through a general national ethos of honoring and valuing things like literature, culture, and history. He also indicates that in order for all of this to function well, humanities professionals must be in some sense accountable to public audiences in their work. But as I conclude my remarks today I would like to push this further, because I do not think that it is inevitable that arguments for the humanities will always be made from the point of view of public investment and the public good.

Recently, we have seen a number of arguments that run in exactly the opposite direction. The National Endowment for the Humanities, founded by the United States Federal Government in 1965, is under the very real threat of closure in the coming year. Not cuts, not downsizing, but elimination. The recently proposed federal budget, which must now face review in congress, recommends that the NEH cease its operations. As the President of the University of Washington, Ana Mari Cauce, has written, “budgets are values made real.” And budgets also therefore make humanistic arguments, to go back to Laurence’s point that the humanities help us answer “questions about value, purpose, meaning, and belief.” The federal budget in its current form poses a question to congress and to all of us about exactly what we value.

The National Endowment for the Humanities is a vital center of activity for the humanities workforce nationwide. It is also the most powerful mechanism in existence for ensuring that, as the President of the Mellon Foundation, Earl Lewis puts it, “rural and urban communities will be supported equitably” in terms of engagement with humanistic knowledge – in other words, for ensuring that no matter where you live, you will have access to your own national, cultural heritage. “Since its creation, NEH has awarded more than \$5.3 billion for humanities projects through more than 63,000 grants. That public investment has led to the creation of books, films, and museum exhibits, and to ensuring the preservation of significant cultural resources around the country.” And when they say around the country, they mean every corner of the country. In our state, this takes the form of significant financial support for *Humanities Washington*, our state humanities council. They underwrite major programming in every county, most notably by sending inspiring and highly-regarded speakers to cities and small towns alike – a number of our own faculty have served as speakers for this program.

I grew up in a logging town in rural Grays Harbor County, here in Washington, just south of the Olympic Peninsula. It is a beautiful, but remote, part of our region. Like so many areas in our country, my hometown is not at the center of cultural and economic activity. It is in the margins of that activity. And the children who grow up in such places should not have to find the natural beauty that surrounds them sufficient to their development as full and free human beings. The function of the NEH is to send cultural remittances from the centers to the margins. And it does its job exceptionally well, and with very little funding in the context of the federal budget. Neil deGrasse Tyson put it in perspective when he remarked, “Cutting the NEH to save money on a 3-trillion dollar budget is like thinking that a quarter of a mile is far relative to the width of the

United States.” He’s right, insofar as the numbers are concerned. But he’s wrong in his interpretation of the line of thinking that is at work in this budget. The budget proposes that public funds should not be invested in public cultural life. It is a statement of value. Not about the humanities, but about the people who can only afford to engage the humanities when they are freely given. The argument in favor of public funds for the humanities is that things such as our literature and culture already “belong to all Americans.”

There is a critical need at all levels of our educational system, and, in fact, across all sectors of the economy, for workers with training in the humanities. There is a critical need in our civic discourse and in every form of public service for people with strong backgrounds in the humanities. In short, there is a critical need for each of our graduates today to go into the world and lead. As you enter the humanities workforce, wherever you do your work, I strongly encourage you to put your training to the service of the public good.

Congratulations, and thank you.