

ACTA
Higher Ed Now
Reinvigorating the Humanities in American Life

Christine: You are listening to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on issues in higher education. I'm your host, Christine Ravold. This week I'm joined by Dr. Bruce Cole, former Chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities, distinguished scholar of art history and comparative literature, author and also former Trustee in Indiana University. Dr. Cole, welcome to Higher Ed Now.

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Dr. Cole: Thank you.

Christine: Thank you so much for joining us. You've had a 30,000-foot view of the liberal arts from several distinct vantage points. On the whole, how would you say the liberal arts are doing?

Dr. Cole: That's a very good question. First, let me say how happy I am to be here and how much I appreciate all the work that ACTA's done. I've followed ACTA really since its inception many years ago and found their work especially beneficial when I was a trustee of a major university. So, this is a complex question. I think the liberal arts are not doing all that well. They could do much better. I mean if you look at the number of liberal arts degrees, if you look at the number of credit hours that students are taking in the liberal arts, if you look at sort of the general reputation of the liberal arts and now and consider the challenges that STEM poses to them, there are an awful lot of issues.

Christine: When you say STEM, you mean Science, Technology and Engineering and Math courses?

Dr. Cole: Exactly. I mean I think there's always been a push, mainly by parents but also by students themselves to make sure you get, what I call a kind of practical education, so you have a job when you leave. I mean that isn't my

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philosophy. I believe that a liberal arts education teaches you to think and write, gives you a perspective and appreciation that you can then use in any kind of job, whereas some kind of narrow technical training doesn't do that. So, I'm a big champion of liberal arts, I'm a big champion of the humanities.

Christine: Do you think that's a result of the changing economy and people have been scared since the last recession? The economy hasn't recovered in the same way. Or, do you think it has just been trending for a very long time?

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Dr. Cole: I think it's been trending, but I think it was accelerated after 2008 with the great recession. I mean if you're talking about liberal arts education, I think that's more than humanities. It's social science. It's the sciences and the like. I think the real problem comes in the humanities because the humanities are, in many quarters, in disrepute. What's happened to humanities, I think, is that there's been increasing specialization of knowledge. So much so that there are not only sub fields, but sub-sub-sub fields and these inhabitants of these sub-fields are basically talking to each other and have lost sight of the fact that there's a greater good to the humanities. That the humanities should be accessible to everyone.

So, if you look at history, for example, and you look at the people who are reaching our citizens in humanities, publications, biographies and the like you see that many of them, in fact, I would hazard to say most of them are not professors. They're not dwellers of some archaic sub-specialty, but they're journalists who can write well, can tell a story. Now some of these journalists, of course, utilize the fruits of scholarship but this is the thing that in the 20th century and the early 21st century, not so much, but really in the 20th century and before that scholars did, they communicated to a larger public.

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And then there's the issue of political correctness, of course, that in the humanities fields and we see the manifestation of that in places like Middlebury and other...

Christine: Evergreen State.

Dr. Cole: Evergreen State is probably the poster child for this. And a lot of these questionable things come out of humanities departments. And I don't want to paint with too broad a brush. I mean there are people in humanities departments that value free speech and open discourse and the like but, obviously, a lot of this comes out of the humanities department. And that tends basically to tarnish the whole...

Christine: To take you back to a moment when you talked about how the humanities were really creating the stress in the liberal arts. You are obviously humanities for humanities sake kind of person. Can you talk about the practical good and the public good that comes out of the arts literature history?

Dr. Cole: Well, I'm all for the humanities. I mean I believe very strongly in the value of the humanities for a kind of civil and civilized nation. But, as I said, you know the humanities give you a perspective. They introduce you to great ideas of the world, not only of the western world, but the entire world. They give you an appreciation of literature, of art, of science. They make you think and they give you examples of how to write well.

And so, all those things are good. The thing that I can't defend is the humanities as they are today. It's very difficult because of the reasons we were talking about. I mean the increasing isolation of the humanities from the general population, the

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theoretical bent where somebody starts out with a theory and then hammers the evidence into it.

Christine: We've seen a lot of that recently.

Dr. Cole: Exactly. And the increasing self-isolation of the humanities. So, it's very difficult. I mean, as I say, you know it's paradoxical because I can really defend the humanities and see the strength of the humanities, but in a way, it's the humanities in colleges and universities that have kind of created the problem that we're faced with now. There's also what I could call the public humanities, which I think are in much better shape. Although, they are also influenced by some of this and increasingly so.

Christine: Can you tell me what the public humanities are?

Dr. Cole: That is museums, archives, historical societies, encyclopedias, all those things that reach a large public. I think that it's a mistake to think about the humanities only in colleges and universities because there's lots of important humanities activities outside of what's going on. And it's really a mistake to think that endowments are the mainstay and supporters of the humanities and arts. And if they weren't around...

Christine: When you say the endowments, you mean NEH and NEA.

Dr. Cole: NEH and NEA. I mean the total combined budget for the NEA and the NEH is something like \$300,000,000. But the amount of money spent on arts and culture and research in humanities in colleges and universities is in the billions. So, the role really that colleges and universities play is not the whole picture. There's a lot of other things going on that are in relatively good shape.

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Christine: Can you tell me a little bit about the work you've done in the digital humanities and kind of broadening that scope to what the public is able to get access to?

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Dr. Cole: Yeah. Well the digital humanities are real interests of mine. When I came to the NEH in 2001, I was pretty much of a luddite and you know I had a computer and I used it to write on and occasionally to email, but the web was still kind of in its infancy.

Christine: Yeah, I can remember that.

Dr. Cole: When I got to the endowment I saw the work that had been being done. The first people who really, I think, utilized the power of the digital world were the librarians. And I think there are other commercial aspects to it that have already been explored and even pretty vigorously at that time. But, in a way, I think the digital humanities are the new frontier of humanities knowledge. And I've been going around with Vint Cerf, who was basically one of the inventors of the internet and who Google's internet evangelist, and a very cool guy.

In talking about the digital humanities, I talk about the power of the digital humanities and the way they've kind of—the possibility to reshape the landscape of the humanities. And he talks about that as well, but also about the very urgent need to make sure that we preserve this digital material, but that's another issue. But the idea that you can access, sort and put together enormous amounts of material in a way not possible.

As Vint says, you know he as a librarian he talks to the books, but in the digital world all the books talk to each other. And eventually they'll be what you might call one work, one book where everything...

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Christine: So, it's a dynamic interaction.

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Dr. Cole: Yeah. We'll all be linked together. But in a sort of practical sense one of the things we sponsored at the NEH was American Chronicle, which is the digitalization of historic American newspapers, which will eventually start with the very beginning in all languages up to the 30's. I mean they are copyright issues. So, before, if you wanted to do some research, say you wanted to find out the election returns of several colonies in Ohio, you would have to travel to various archives and hope that their newspapers were preserved.

But with American Chronicle you can see the actual pages and you can search it. So, if you are looking for how candidate X did in some obscure county, you can go that in that newspaper or for reference works something like the Oxford Dictionary of Classical Antiquity. I think that's what it's called. You had a reference work when it came off the press it was finished. That was it.

Now, with the digital world you can put that online. You can have the atlas. You can have maps, GPS, you can update it, but that's only one part of it. The other part of it is to be able to sort and slice and dice this knowledge and really these facts, this information and really come up with new knowledge. So, that's very, very exciting. Now you have to make sure you're digitizing...

Christine: Obviously, this is going to be more open access, so this isn't just for people who are going to Columbia and Yale.

Dr. Cole: No. Absolutely. And that's why I like it so much because it is open access. It's not a monastery, but a market place. I'm a big fan of Wikipedia. Now,

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I know Wikipedia has a lot of problems, but nonetheless, I think it's the second or third most consulted, visited website in the world. It has...

Christine: That sounds about right.

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Dr. Cole: ...countless numbers of articles. It's dynamic and it can be, you know there's all this self-norming, where you now have to have footnotes and you know your article or contribution can be looked at by thousands and thousands of eyes. Some of them with very deep pockets of knowledge. So, what I like about it is the democracy of the web. There are some problems with Wikipedia. The most problems arise when you're dealing with say an article on a current political figure, because everybody's in there continually changing [inaud]. You know I wrote for the Encyclopedia Britannica when it was in its text version.

Christine: That's super cool. What subjects?

Dr. Cole: I did some articles on an artist. How did that work? I had an editor who found out about me. I submitted it and it got published. Now, if you do an article like that on Wikipedia it's looked at, as I said, by many, many people. Some of them have incredibly deep subject matter knowledge. But not only that, I mean the Encyclopedia Britannica, when it was in its [voices overlap] form, it could only encompass so many articles.

So, if you wanted to look up some obscure garage band of the 1970's you're not going to find it in the Encyclopedia Britannica, but you will find it in Wikipedia. And then, because of the Wikis you can expand your search, drill down, visit archives where this material might be and see, you know videos. So there's an ever-expanding democratic world. So, you don't want the humanities to be the

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neruo preserve of academia. You know you really want them to be accessible to everyone and that in turn, I think, generates support for them.

Christine: Tell me a little bit of, how you see the humanities playing into civic life. I know you had a lot to do with the We the People initiative at any age.

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Dr. Cole: Well, we launched an initiative called, "We the People," which I have to say was pretty successful. We did a piece of it called, "Picturing America," where we sent very high-quality reproductions of American art to tell the story of this country to eventually 80,000 public schools and libraries. What has happened is a real dearth of knowledge, civic and history knowledge.

I don't see civics and history as different. I mean in some ways, for me, the old definition of civics is you learn how to get a bill passed, how to approach your city council, the mechanisms of it. But I think civics, you can't really understand civics unless you understand [voices overlap] why we have a legislature, why we have the various branches of government. Why we have senators, why we have representatives.

So, this is, I think, really troubling because there are tests and polls, very good ones, ACTA really has been on top of this. That show...

Christine: It's one of our favorite issues.

Dr. Cole: Yeah, a dearth of knowledge and you know you need to have this knowledge transmitted to our rising generation. I think Jefferson said something like, "A nation..."

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Christine: That expects to be ignorant and free, expects what never was and never will be.”

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Dr. Cole: Exactly. The founders knew this. I mean they were very interested in this but the knowledge of American history, just look at the NAPE tests...

Christine: They're pretty discouraging.

Dr. Cole: [voices overlap] the worst I think. Scores were something 52, 53 percent, scoring below basic that's an F. There have been surveys also of adults that show an amazing dearth. Well how can you understand why it's important that our institutions survive? I mean you're kind of a *tabula rasa*. And then, worse than that, you'll believe what anyone says about our history, because you have no defense. Now this is natural, I mean there are obviously students who know about American history, but generally speaking, this is really alarming.

And so, we tried to raise this issue like ACTA did at the National Endowment for Humanities. And the National Endowment for Humanities is no endowment, it's all funded by taxpayer money. I thought that this was really something that was vital to the endowment and also to the NEA. But these programs that we launched are no longer there. They're gone. But we could only do so much with our budget and the like.

Christine: Sure. You know you would hope that colleges and universities would pick up where you left off.

Dr. Cole: But that's not what happens because often in colleges and universities, and high schools there is less than a rosy picture taught about the United States. Even if you wanted to disparage the country you should have some evidence to

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push against. I mean you should give students an opportunity to mount an argument. I remember when Eisenhower, I don't remember, but I read when Eisenhower became president of Columbia University a number of faculty urged him to fire a Marxist who had been teaching, I don't know if it was in the English department or not.

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And he said, "No, no." He said, "It's really important for students to understand the dangers of communism, and Marxism." And so, even if you're going to disparage something, you need to know what you're disparaging.

Christine: Mount the better ideas instead.

Dr. Cole: The university has tried, but it should be a marketplace of ideas. But I'm afraid, in too many universities that's not happening.

Christine: Would you say that what we are seeing, in terms of a limiting of academic freedom or viewpoint diversity, would you trace that to some of the atrophies in the humanities or the liberal arts? Or, do you think that's a separate issue that is now intertwined?

Dr. Cole: Well, I think they are intertwined. It's clear what's happening on college and university campuses now. I mean there's always been protests, and I'm for protests and I'm for free speech but the level of acrimony and sometimes violence is really frightening. It's imperative on university presidents to say, "Look, everybody's got to have free speech." Universities should be a marketplace of ideas. It shouldn't be dominated by one idea. And students should, as we were saying, should be given the opportunity to see a wide variety of viewpoints.

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Christine: Did you encounter any specific incidents of this in your time as a trustee or as a professor?

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Dr. Cole: Well, you know the trustees, and I'm not necessarily speaking about my own experience and ACTA has really been very good in this, need to get more involved.

Christine: The trustees do.

Dr. Cole: The trustees, yeah. They're not just there to sign the checks. They have the fiduciary responsibility to make sure that universities do the best job they can, are economical as possible. I mean if you look at the cost universities, compared to the cost living and the enormous mushrooming of administration, trustees have a role. I don't think that trustees, and it think this really too often the case, they think they're there to get the reports from the president and administrators and then sign the checks.

And that's not the way it should be. I think trustees need to be much more active. And I think ACTA has had a great role in basically telling them that. But these are successful people. You know they run big businesses. They're patrons and the like, but they tend to defer. The university is a big, complex machine and I think they tend to defer to the university's administration. Not all, but a lot of them.

I did see one thing that I thought was interesting I think is pretty widespread, I'm for a core. And I think what students come to universities now and it's a kind of smorgasbord. You know they don't really know anything in common. So, I know from teaching you could be talking to a class and they had no kind of core knowledge of say history, of religion. They had never been together in this experience. So, what's happening is you have these Gen-Ed curriculums and

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they have four fields of inquiry. Adversity is one of them [voices overlap] and then the distribution requirements but because every professor in every department is fighting for a piece of the pie because they have to have the credit hours. You get 800 courses, I'm not kidding, that students can take to fulfill these distribution requirements. And what you have is the biggest smorgasbord of all.

Christine: I always refer to it as inflation of the course catalog.

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Dr. Cole: Yeah, exactly. And so that's not helpful. I don't know if anybody could agree upon a core now.

Christine: Can you talk a little bit about, we have encountered protests over the years, like at Stanford, most famously, where we tried to get rid of western civilization. But there's also a unifying aspect of studying perhaps the great books or going through a pretty tight curriculum that creates a community on campus that's actually larger than the class.

Dr. Cole: Absolutely. You find these commonalities and if you look at, (sounds like: I think it was Maya Angelou) for her Shakespeare was a black woman. In other words, she saw in her human condition and the human condition generally, Shakespeare. I mean there was no greater exponent of that. So, this is knowledge that's open to anyone. I think it's enlightening. I think it gives perspective. And I think it brings us together, especially if students have all read the same text and discussed and the great works.

The great works are not limited to the western canon, but there is a canon and the canon is there because those books create the canon. And to just jettison them, you know I find that if I look at reading lists now of so many of these courses there's nothing much past 1990—1980 [voices overlap] and I think that's

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encouraged by television and radio. We live in a kind of present [word/inaud] and it's very hard to get students to think about the past.

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I mean if you think about television, what do you see that really has a kind of historical content? Not much.

Christine: No, the History channel, certainly not.

Dr. Cole: No. Absolutely. And you could look at PBS and say, "Okay, well..." But PBS is such a limited catchment and such a particular demography of people who kind of already believe in some of that. These all add to it and I mean it's increasingly hard to get people's attention. I mean when you have to have a new image every 15 seconds, so that adds to it. There are a lot of obstacles.

Christine: There's a tension there between what you can use, in terms of technology, but what you have on the table with the digital humanities and what you can offer educationally and then what most people use it for.

Dr. Cole: Right. And with digital world you have to know how to use it. I remember I gave a talk somewhere and talked about the digital world and Wikipedia and the like. And I said, "You know if I was a university president, which thankfully I'm not, and somebody came to me with plans for a library I'd say, "No, we're not building libraries anymore." Because that's not the way it's going to work. I mean these things are all going to be digitized and if you want a hard copy you can go someplace, eventually, and get one of the cappuccino book machines to print it out for you, or you can print it out yourself.

So the idea that you have a repository, where all the books are—I love books. I read them sometimes. So that's all changing, but you have to have a kind of

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discernment and critical apparatus that the humanities do teach you to use this digital world. I mean you talk about fake news and...

Christine: Well, I think that's a really great point where you can dovetail civic literacy with critical thinking and liberal arts skills. You wouldn't need to regulate fake news or have Facebook pull fake news for you if people had the media literacy and the civic literacy to understand what they were reading.

Dr. Cole: Absolutely. That's a good point.

Christine: You've written a lot about relativism in art and how there's not a lot of standards being applied to aesthetics. Is that similar in the curricula?

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Dr. Cole: Well, I think what's happened in art is, you know it's happening in a lot of other fields. I mean this has been a really decisive break with the past, starting with post-modernism. And this also moves art away from a large appreciation.

Christine: Or communication with the past even.

Dr. Cole: And with people. People just scratch their head when they see this. So, I think that there's been a decisive break and part of that has been the rejection of the canon. And also, there's been a, if you're talking about art history, there's been a decrease in course taught. So, if you wanted a course in say Dutch art, 50 years ago you could find one in a university. But now they're being replaced by people who study contemporary art, which is really too bad.

And then that is also influencing the way museums mount exhibitions. I mean there's a real desire now to make things available, I would say kind of pander, not only in the big blockbuster shows, but in other things.

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Christine: Can you give us your thoughts on how the humanities can bind their self-inflicted wounds and perhaps come back to a place where they command the respect that they really deserve?

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Dr. Cole: I'm pessimistic. I'm really pessimistic, because the problem is so widespread that I don't know if they will come back. I hope so. I can't offer an easy solution.

Christine: Well, no, I don't know if it's an easy solution. And, like you said, it's a widespread problem that's kind of manifested itself over a long period of time. But that is why ACTA is here. We're our darnedest to educate trustees, alumni and advocates of the humanities and bringing them together to really educate the wider general public about the importance of the humanities and what they offer to society at large, so we're going to be optimistic about the fate of the humanities, because they're just too good to be kept down for long.

Dr. Cole: This is a really important national issue and that's how I felt when I was in the endowment. I mean I think it would be good if some of the national museums, some of the historical societies, so I think there could be more efforts. I don't know whether this can be changed. I don't whether any of these things will ever get back to the way there were, and maybe they shouldn't. But they should have some connection with the past and they should encourage the studies of these things in the humanities because they're valuable and they've been valuable for thousands of years.

Christine: You know I think that's a really point to end on. That we're looking to preserve the rich tradition of the humanities, but also to innovate constructively

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where technology, access and curiosity can offer new things into this really rich tradition. Dr. Cole, thank you so much for joining us today.

Dr. Cole: Thank you for having me. Pleased to be here.

Christine: To learn more about how ACTA is working to help the humanities visit www.goACTA.org. If you have questions or comments about this podcast, please send them to info@goACTA.org. Until next time, I'm Christine Ravold and this is Higher Ed Now.

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