Chapter 1

The Humanities Crisis
Then and Now

Nearly everyone seems to believe the humanities are in crisis. Hardly a week has gone by since I began research for this book late in 2009 without an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Inside Higher Ed*, or *Washington Post* about the declining prestige of the humanities, the defunding of its programs, and the poor employment prospects of its students. The supposed causes of the crisis are by now familiar. Students and their parents have increasingly come to see a college or university education as vocational training. They want maximum value for the high cost of higher education, and that value is increasingly measured in utilitarian terms. Courses in the humanities seem of little practical use at best, and, at worst, like a waste of time. The intangible value of an education in history, philosophy, literature, and the fine arts is of decreasing interest to families worried about their children’s employment prospects. Study in the humanities disciplines seems backward looking and without any utility in an age of exploding technology. For this reason students are flocking to the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines because, unlike the humanities, they are forward looking. Add to all of this the pressures of a sustained economic recession and the increasing corporatization of higher education, where the bottom-line mentality of boards of trustees dominated by executives from the business community tends to dominate budget priorities, and you have something like a constellation of forces that, worse than a crisis, seem to portend the very end of the humanities.

The only problem with this dire scenario of the contemporary plight of the humanities is that there is little that is new about it at all. The humanities have always been in a state of crisis. As Frank Donoghue has shown in *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (2008), the educational value of humanities courses has regularly been questioned by business elites who worried about their practical value. From this point of view contemporary debates about the practical value of the humanities seem nearly as old as the humanities themselves. As Donoghue observes, “The terms of the so-called crisis, from the academic humanist perspective, are always the same: corporate interests and values are poised to overwhelm the ideals of the liberal arts and to transform the university into a thoroughly businesslike workplace” (1). From early in the twentieth century, Donoghue observes, “the great capitalists…saw in America’s universities a set of core values and a management style antithetical to their own” (2). “America’s early twentieth-century capitalists,” he demonstrates, “were motivated by an ethically based anti-intellectualism that transcended interest in the financial bottom line,” for it had its ultimate origins in a “distrust of the ideal of intellectual inquiry for its own sake” (3). From this point of view questions about the utility of a humanities education do not seem part of a contemporary crisis, but rather, are a structural character of higher education.

The perennial nature of the rhetoric of crisis surrounding the humanities also becomes clear by simply searching “crisis of the humanities” in the Humanities Citation Index. That search will turn up nearly 20 articles dating back to 1990. According to these articles the humanities have fallen into crisis because of the emergence of cultural studies, a new focus on canons and culture, the influence of Nietzsche, political and economic forces, or simply because they’re becoming irrelevant. In 2010, Wayne Bivens-Tatum, the philosophy and religion librarian at Princeton University, searched “crisis in the humanities” in JSTOR and found articles on the topic dating from 1922. He notes that by the 1940s “a steady stream of complaints” about the state of the humanities had developed. Indeed, his essay is full of quotes from scholars in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (1965 saw the publication, for example, of a book titled *Crisis in the Humanities*) decrying the crisis in the humanities. And, as he points out, the reasons for that crisis are nearly always the same. “Not only is the sense of crisis decades old and persistent,” he observes, “but for the most part the causes are as well. Students are choosing professional programs over the humanities; the sciences have the most