Chapter 2

Professionalism and Its Discontents

I pointed out in the last chapter how deeply ironic it is that when critics both inside and outside of academia lament the state of the humanities, they put the blame on the over professionalization of faculty. Of course this point of view reflects a more general belief outside the academy that professors in general—and humanities professors in particular—speak an arcane language, employ overly complicated methodologies, and indulge themselves in research topics nobody else understands. If professors of English, so the argument goes, would just spend more time in the classroom exploring literature itself with their students in commonsense language uncontaminated by their professionalized discourses, we would all be better-off. I think this argument is, by and large, misguided. In fact, as I will be arguing in this chapter, the transferable skill students learn in humanities courses are largely the product of their engagement with the professional training they receive from their professors.

Blaming the professionalization of the professoriate for the shrinking relevance of the humanities is, of course, paradoxical, for one can hardly profess without being a professional. After all, a profession is a paid occupation requiring formal qualifications and highly specific training. The word professing has, in its older form, a deep connection with professionalism, of course, for it implies a kind of public claim to knowledge and a set of skills, along with a commitment to teaching (or professing) that knowledge and those skills. A professional, it seems, can hardly profess without being professional, which is to say, teaching a branch of knowledge in an expert way. It
seems, then, that the essence of being a professor is to be professional, so the idea that professionalization is harming the humanities seems counterintuitive.

Professors who blame professionalization for a significant share of the humanities crisis do so because they believe that a focus on critical theories and methodologies distracts students’ attention from the core authors and subjects that ought to be at the center of a humanities education. We saw an example of this in the last chapter when Andrew Delbanco complained that critique had trumped cura- tion in the humanities. Delbanco’s argument is based on the idea that if the general population is becoming more and more skeptical about the value of the humanities it has to do with a historical conflict in the United States between “a genuine yearning for enlightenment” and an “ingrained distrust of eggheads.” For this reason, Delbanco insists, the humanities have to find a way to earn back the public trust: “Academics concerned with the life of the mind generally, and the academic humanities in particular,” will be well served by looking inward and asking what we can do to earn public trust.” Delbanco, to his credit, insists the humanities can only earn this trust if they can find a way to demonstrate their practical value. “Most Americans,” he insists, “are neither anti nor pro-intellectual but bring to the question the same pragmatic attitude they bring to everything else: a desire to see results.” “Those who believe in a broad liberal education for all Americans,” he continues, have a “demand for some demonstrable utility in what we teach: literature, history, philosophy, the arts.” However, the “utility” Delbanco has in mind is not related to the kinds of critical thinking, analytical, or rhetorical expertise I discussed in the last chapter, but rather, one related to what E. D. Hirsch called cultural literacy, with its emphasis on a canonical body of texts and ideas all students should know. As we have already seen, in Delbanco’s view the skills associated with critical inquiry have usurped the centrality of cultural literacy, and for this reason he insists we need a dramatic recalibration of the balance between the “curatorial” and the “critical” functions of the humanities.

The main lines of Delbanco’s analysis reflect the more traditional approach to the humanities we explored in the last chapter. It pits a commitment to cultural literacy (defined narrowly as familiarity with canonical Western texts) over-against the proficiencies associated with criticism, theory, and professionalization. If the humanities have lost the trust of the public, it is the fault of over professionalization, an emphasis on critical and theoretical skills at the expense of cultural literacy. The crisis in the humanities, then, becomes the