

What is *working*—in helping to expand the possible “uses” of humanities graduate education?

Ashley Cheyemi McNeil

What is one experiment you’ve tried or observed that drew on the best of humanities mindsets, methods, and materials but also helped prepare graduate students for a range of careers? For example, you might have taught a fairly traditional period-based course, but focused on skills development or asked students to share their discoveries in a public-facing format. You might have developed an approach to admissions or comps or a “dissertation” that were especially valuable for students who are interested in drawing on their graduate training to work outside higher ed.

Taking on an infrastructure lens, one thing I know for sure is working is the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Leading Edge Fellowship, which has been a game-changer in applying humanities graduate education in high impact community spaces. Having experienced both sides, as an alumna and an upcoming host within a social justice arts nonprofit organization where I currently serve as the Director of Education and Research, I can attest to its efficacy. Beyond being a career boost for recent humanities PhDs, the program serves as a unique compound investment. Firstly, it provides invaluable opportunities for the fellows, empowering them not only to contribute their skills and perspectives to social justice nonprofit organizations, but also to imagine far beyond the usual list of jobs that humanists “can do” beyond the university. Secondly, and just as significantly, it offers nonprofits like mine access to a skilled and considerate team member for two years at no cost—a crucial resource for smaller organizations like ours, where such an addition can make a substantial difference in departmental success. Equally significant, the program prompts social justice nonprofits to reevaluate the role of a humanist in advancing their mission. Scholars engaged in community-based research rightfully emphasize reciprocity between academia and community partners to ensure mutual benefit. The Leading Edge Fellowship takes this a step further by challenging organizations to contemplate how a formally trained humanist can become an integral, long-term team member. This necessitates not only identifying immediate needs or projects but, more crucially, prompts organizations to strategize on integrating humanists into their future organizational development and enduring social impact.

Switching to a broader, more social (dare I say more humanist?) lens, another thing that is working is *this work itself*. This work, meaning this long-view strategy of building consensus and recruiting advocates across disciplines, departments, and dispositions. Of convening stakeholders, listening closely and compassionately to the myriad pressures and concerns folks bring to the collective table of curious changemakers, and pressing ever onwards to the goal of servicing the public good. Of sharing ideas, perspectives, and resources and nudging the system at each level, from the assignment sheet to the dissertation requirements to the ways we recognize expertise outside the academy. Sometimes these efforts may feel fringe or slow-going. But to be sure, this work is working.