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## OPINION: Hiding It from the Kids (With Apologies to Simon and Garfunkel)

Gerald Graff and Andrew Hoberek

**F**rom 1995 to 1998, the two of us worked together as Director and Assistant Director of the Master of Arts Program in the Humanities (MAPH) at the University of Chicago. A major part of our annual cycle consisted of sifting through and choosing among hundreds of graduate applications. The more we sifted, the more we realized we were getting a quick and disheartening education in what talented recent college graduates think it's in their interest to say in order to gain the opportunity to do graduate work in the humanities.

Most disheartening was the realization that the problems in the applications often stemmed not from deficiencies in the applicants, but from someone else's failure to make clear to them what would be wanted. Our experience reading graduate applications suggested, to us at least, that today's applicants are getting either bad advice or no advice at all. The problem goes deeper than inadequate counseling, however. And it shows up—though we won't try to document this observation here—not just in graduate applications, but in the processes by which high school students apply to college, graduate students apply for jobs, and professors apply for grants. At all levels we find a lack of interest in socializing hopeful members of the academic family into its particular customs, beliefs, and behaviors.

What motivates this withholding of information is no doubt complicated, but we think it has something to do with the general distaste for institutions that has been common since the 1950s among American intellectuals, modern artists, conservative

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aesthetes, radical critics of professionalism, and other otherwise disparate groups. Academic humanists have been eager to disavow their membership in institutions, and this guilt or shame at being institutionalized seems to issue in a reluctance to contaminate others with the taint of the institution. At its most extreme, this attitude issues in the reluctance of some members of the profession to wield their authority in the classroom, a reluctance that paradoxically keeps students mystified about how one gets and uses power. But on another level, our entrenched anti-institutionalism makes us reluctant to imagine graduate education as the professional training it presumably is. Loathe to “impose” our institutional practices even on those who would follow in our footsteps, we end up unintentionally transforming these practices into mysterious guild secrets.

Our failure as academics to impart even the slightest clue as to what we expect of applicants thus reflects a more widespread failure to talk openly with our colleagues about what we expect of ourselves. Indeed, the academy often seems both to insiders and outsiders like a big high school, where cliques form according to mysteriously defined qualities of taste and insight, and where the “cool” kids set the tone according to rules that seem to have been made obscure on purpose. As a recent college graduate replied to one of us when asked if her English major had given her a sense of current trends in the field, “The premise seemed to be that if I was any good I already knew such things. And I couldn’t ask for explanations since I didn’t want to look dumb.”

The application process, with its “don’t ask, don’t tell” character, therefore turns out to be a surprisingly good vantage point for assessing a range of ambiguities, tensions, and misconceptions within the culture of humanistic scholarship. Indeed, in our view, problems with the application process point to larger pedagogical concerns, highlighting deficiencies in undergraduate education that call for attention and discussion. To be sure, since only a tiny fraction of undergraduates hope to go on to graduate school, and an even tinier fraction actually do, this might seem like a limited problem, to be addressed at most with a few advising sessions. Our experience with graduate applications suggests, however, that the intellectual habits encouraged by undergraduate humanities study are at the root of the problem and that these habits prepare students poorly not just for graduate school but for most walks of life.

The graduate application process is, moreover, a good place from which to view the impact on students of the financial crisis currently affecting research universities. In the past, when a college degree was not as absolute a prerequisite for vocational success as it has become, young people who did not go to college at all were not necessarily shut out of the best careers, as they tend to be today. And at the doctoral level, when financial support was generous and college teaching jobs were plentiful, it was relatively easy to gain admittance to a PhD program, even if the applicant had only the shakiest conception of academic research.

Our own careers, dissimilar as they are, illustrate this point: both of us were admitted to top doctoral programs (in 1959 and 1989, respectively) with strong financial support, even though as applicants we had only the foggiest notion of what terms like *research*, *the profession*, and *academic field* entailed. But in just a decade, this situation has changed entirely (and probably permanently): were we to apply today, the rudimentary knowledge of the profession that we displayed would almost certainly hurt our chances, if not disqualify us altogether. In other words, in today's climate of shrinking budgets and much stiffer competition for far fewer PhD slots, the costs of cluelessness have vastly escalated.

Chicago's MAPH is a case in point: many of our students come to us as referrals from PhD programs at the university and pay almost \$25,000 in tuition in the hope that our MA will get them into the PhD program for which they originally applied. That is, these applicants end up in our program because they could not be funded at the PhD level, as many of them would have been only a decade ago. These students naturally wonder what the difference is between themselves and those who were accepted to the PhD program. And so far as we can judge, there is no discernible difference except that the successful applicants had a better sense of what to say in their applications (Andrew can personally attest to reading numerous applications better than the one that got him into the PhD program in English in the late eighties). Many of our students, in other words, go deeply into debt to find out from MAPH what their college education failed to tell them.

We're not talking about deep esoteric secrets here and certainly not about some bag of cheap tricks for advancing in a careerist academic game. We're talking about rhetorical principles that could readily be imparted to any grad school applicant. For as things stand, bright and sophisticated graduate applicants are unwittingly making exactly the moves that are certain to undermine their chances. For example, in the statement of purpose every applicant is asked to write, the vast majority say they want to go on for a doctorate because they "love literature"—or art history, philosophy, classical archaeology, history, and so forth. Here is a typical statement:

Ever since age three I've been passionately in love with the sensuous sounds of words. So when *Mother Goose* was read to me in my crib, I somehow simply knew I was destined for a lifelong love affair with literature. . . .

Now contrary to recent accusations (and to what some of you may now be angrily thinking), it is not true that today's academic humanists are so besotted with theory, political correctness, and arid research that pure love of literature no longer matters, or even constitutes a disqualification. It is not that love of literature is no longer considered a good thing, but that in a graduate application this love is taken for granted and therefore doesn't score any points: it's a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for entrance into graduate school.

After all, the other five hundred or so applicants also presumably love literature, impressionist painting, or what you will—there are precious few other reasons for getting a PhD these days. Even those who believe that love of literature is all that should be required to join the academic club would be loath to commit themselves to a doctor whose only qualification was that she really loved the human body. In PhD application workshops we have developed in MAPH, we suggest to students that the point they need to get across is not that they love their subjects but that they are ready to join an intellectual conversation about what they love. They need to translate their passion for the subject into an indication that they wish to participate in this discussion at a professional level, rather than simply enhancing their private enjoyment of art, philosophy, or classics.

This means showing that they have some plausible picture of the academic field or subfield they envision themselves joining. Here, for example, is only one of the many possible ways to improve on “I love literature” and *Mother Goose*:

My wish to continue graduate study at the PhD level has been sparked by an interest in our recent version of the ancient debate over the social functions of the arts. More specifically, . . .

To us this new version doesn't sound arid, dry, or smacking of shallow careerism. It does manage to give an indication of how the applicant imagines channeling a personal passion for the humanities into the sorts of conversations in which professional humanists engage.

But how do we know that the second kind of statement is likely to impress graduate applications committees more than the first? And at a time when so many who do go on for a PhD fail to find teaching positions, is prepping students to impress such committees a wise and ethically defensible thing to do?

As it happens, these are exactly the questions that MAPH was devised to address. MAPH is one of the growing number of new master's programs that aims to encourage career alternatives for graduate students in the humanities alongside the traditional doctoral/college-teaching track.<sup>1</sup> Approximately half of the fifty to sixty students who enroll in our one-year program do so in the hope that MAPH will help them get into a doctoral program and eventually become college teachers. The other half, however (as well as a significant portion of the former group, whose priorities change during their year with us), take the MAPH degree with a range of other potential occupations in mind, including high school teaching, museum and gallery curatorship, journalism, editing, and business. Thus, for example, we have developed internships for our graduates in local firms such as the Monsanto and Nuveen Corporations, and we work closely and effectively with the university's career and placement office.

Aiming as we do to serve both academic and nonacademic career aspirants, MAPH necessarily operates on the faith that writing and research in the academic

humanities can speak to the needs of corporations and other nonacademic institutions as well as of the academy. We assume, that is, that not only do the corporate and the academic worlds have important things to say to each other, but that the same thinking, research, and writing skills can be adapted for use in both worlds.

To put it another way, we encourage translation between academic and nonacademic spheres. The true value of a program like MAPH lies not in training freelance academics to serve as missionaries bringing the light of academic reason to the rest of the world, but in reimagining effective academics and nonacademics alike as public intellectuals, people able to talk not just to their own colleagues but across the barriers as well. And as we have evolved in practice, our program has become a year-long seminar on how to write for readers who don't necessarily share one's special terminology, one's pet assumptions, or one's politics.

Our goal, however, is not to discourage our students from specializing but rather to help them explain their specialties to nonspecialists. Humanists, like everyone else in our complicated society, are already specialists; the question is, can the specialists talk to each other? For us, specialization and generalization are not opposites but complementary aspects of the same process. Our assumption is that no matter what we do, explaining ourselves to nonspecialists will ultimately make us more persuasive with our fellow specialists. We further assume that learning to summarize and enter the conversations around one is excellent rhetorical training whether a student aims to become a professor of late Gothic architecture, a corporate CEO, a labor organizer, or a freelance journalist.

In fact, "Joining the Conversation" has become the unofficial mantra of MAPH. In many ways, the principles we teach in the program are no more than an extension of the rhetorical training provided by first year composition programs—scope out what your intended audience is thinking and construct your own arguments in relation to that. The questions that we ask students to address in everything they write are "So what?" and "Who cares?"

We anticipated when the program began that these assumptions would seem a stretch to many academics and nonacademics alike, since the conventional wisdom is that the academic research "conversation" is so highly specialized that to enter it you must turn your back on the larger public sphere. For a long time this was indeed the case (and still may be in some disciplines and programs). In the modern research university that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, humanist research meant the kind of positivist fact-gathering in which the sheer amount and complexity of one's information counted for more than interpreting it or explaining its uses and abuses. This model, which still remains central to shaping many academic careers, is characterized precisely by its indifference to the questions "So what?" and "Who cares?" The hunch that animated MAPH, however, was that the culture of humanis-

tic research has undergone a profound change since the 1960s and that training MA students to address a wide range of publics, to ask “So what?” and “Who cares?” *as those publics might ask such questions*, would now open doors both to academic and non-academic careers.

After three years, our record provisionally vindicates this thinking, though we recognize the need to be cautious about such declarations in the current volatile environment for higher education. Still, we now have a documented record of success in helping MAPH graduates obtain both nonacademic jobs and admission to PhD programs in the humanities. At last count nearly 90 percent of our students who apply to doctoral programs have been receiving admission with financial support. In some cases, to be sure, this success is due to the year of graduate work they do in the program, not to mention the cultural capital imparted by the prestige of the University of Chicago. But many of our students get accepted to PhD programs before they have even completed one academic quarter with us, and we suspect that some of them would not have needed us—or even Chicago’s imprimatur—if they had been guided earlier in the rhetorical principles that we stress.

Here is where the application process has given our hunches some verification. Even though—or perhaps because—academics often believe that research is overspecialized and narrow, they evidently reward broad-gauged writing when they see it. That is why graduate applicants tend to succeed if they show that they are able not just to analyze a text but to provide an indication of why they are analyzing it and for whom. In other words, applicants who can “enter the conversation” being held by other intellectual interlocutors are likely to be more successful in their efforts to enter the academic world (not to mention more effective in it once they do). The emergent culture of research within the humanities increasingly rewards the generalist, though it may not be aware of it yet.

To return, then, to what disturbs us in the graduate applications we see, it is the evidence that college undergraduates are not getting a sense of the broader contexts and conversations into which they might insert their work. This problem shows up repeatedly in the parts of the application written by the student—the statement of purpose and the writing sample. To be sure, screening committees and individuals don’t all follow the same criteria (and the fact that departments rarely discuss their criteria probably increases the randomness of their decisions, even as it symptomatizes the willed institutional blindness that we have been discussing). Thus some may give more weight to GRE scores, grades, recommendations, or coursework than do others. Nevertheless, in our experience it is the writing done by the candidate that often makes the difference. Nor is this surprising, for as diminished funds increase the pressure on departments to make accurate predictions of which doctoral candidates will succeed, more importance figures to accrue to the candidates’ own writing,

in which qualities of mind can be most readily assessed and the potential for future success be most accurately judged. After all, working academics don't take courses or standardized tests, but they do write.

Then, too, the statement of purpose and writing sample are the parts of the application over which the candidate herself or himself has the most control. And again and again, we are struck in reading these documents how frequently applicants limit their chances by failing to consider the "So what?" and "Who cares?" questions. Take the following hypothetical personal statement openings, the first of which conveys its information in a vacuum, whereas the second indicates how the information contained in the first can be framed within a larger discussion:

**Before:** In one of my seminar papers, I discussed the prevalence of gendered metaphors in Hamlet . . .

**Improved:** In a seminar paper on battle imagery in Hamlet, I discussed the debates inside and outside feminist circles on the question of how specifically gender colors language and how far imagery can be defined as "male," "female," etc. . . .

The first version shows the applicant has enough savvy to apply a current method, feminist interpretation. Unlike the "I love literature" statement we cited earlier, which could as readily have been written in the 1920s as the 1990s, this opening shows that the student is aware of discussions going on today. The improved version does this and more, however, suggesting that the applicant can not only apply a current methodology but also stand back from it, unpack its assumptions, and relate it to broader debates—in short, give an indication of why and for whom he or she wrote the paper in the first place. Both statements reflect the recent interest in the field in the politics of literature. The second, however, is less likely to be labeled as formulaically politically correct by an unsympathetic reader, simply by virtue of the fact that it recognizes that differences of opinion exist on the question of political interpretation. That is, it approaches the question of gender in literary criticism as a controversial issue rather than as a given. It is not a matter of asking students to abandon their political convictions but rather of asking them to explain their convictions to others who might not hold them (it happens). We think it's clear that asking graduate school applicants to approach contested issues as just that can only benefit them later in their careers, when they will have to persuade others of their views.

The same tactic of "entering the conversation" holds for the writing sample. In our rough estimate, fully 90 percent of the sample essays that accompany humanities PhD applications are close readings of a single text. With very few exceptions—and these jump out at us because they are so rare—these essays plunge immediately into a reading of a text or art work with no explanation of why the writer thought the reading needed to be undertaken in the first place. It's easy to see how this happens. These essays were written for a college course in which the reason for writing the

paper was already given in the course topic or specific writing assignment and thus did not need to be mentioned in the paper. The trouble is that such essays don't travel well, since the screening committee members who read them didn't take the course. Once the essays move outside the course, they seem literally pointless, giving no indication that their writers care about the stakes of their reading or argument. They fail to survive the "So what?" or "Who cares?" test (while not incidentally confirming some of our students' impressions that what they do in humanities courses doesn't have any purpose beyond earning credit towards graduation).

In MAPH we suggest to our students that the way to survive the "So what?" test is not to desist from close textual reading, which is still the central and indispensable skill for any humanist, but to try to frame the close reading with a metacommentary that relates it to conversations in the field or the wider culture:

**Before:** I will be arguing in this paper that Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby is an arch example of the commodified self produced by twentieth-century urban America.

**Improved:** Many readers naturally assume that Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby must be "great" because he transcends the conformity that otherwise dominates the twentieth-century America around him. I want to argue in this paper, however, that Gatsby is an arch example of the commodified self produced by twentieth-century urban America.

Whereas the "before" version states its claim as if it were uncontroversial—and therefore uninteresting—the "improved" version imagines a counterview with which it can engage in dialogue. To write an opening like the latter, it is less important to know Fitzgerald criticism (though that obviously helps) than to have a feeling for the kind of hypothetical counterargument that will give interest and bite to the claim you wish to make.

Again, we may seem to be making unrealistic demands on undergraduates, even those smart and committed enough to be serious competitors for graduate school admission. And such demands *are* unrealistic if as an undergraduate you have never been encouraged to think about the larger critical conversation about literature. In our own teaching, however, we have found that this conversation can be introduced into our undergraduate classes and that doing so helps students to generate more pointed arguments about literature than decontextualized close readings do. This, by the way, is what the original New Critics did. Contrary to our latter-day stereotypes of these critics, they never spun their close readings of literature in a vacuum, but always put them in the service of a larger argument about the place of poetry in a society dominated by science, positivism, Victorian moralism, utilitarian values, or what you will.

In a class Andrew recently taught at the University of Puget Sound on Flannery O'Connor, for example, students who had floundered trying on their own to produce an interesting explication of an O'Connor story did discernibly better when asked to

go out and find an article or a book chapter on a story (it doesn't really matter at this level how good or recent the article is) and disagree with it. Gerald notes a similar improvement in focus in student papers when teaching the "Case Study in Critical Controversy" edition of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* he has co-edited with James Phelan.<sup>2</sup> Students find it easier to develop their own arguments about the novel's treatment of race, for example, when they can enter into dialogue with critics who take positions on the question.

Asking students to frame arguments within a conversation actually makes writing humanities papers easier, since it takes what can often be a very vague mandate and replaces it with simple instructions, giving students something to push off from and answering their perennial complaint, "But I don't know what you *want* in this paper." By the time students are ready to apply to graduate school, the instructions should become something like, figure out the received wisdom about your text and show how you refute or go beyond it. Adopting such instructions has the effect of letting students in on the process by which the most influential academics generate their ideas. Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick, for instance, is often considered by advocates and critics alike to be one of the most theoretically sophisticated (or obfuscatory) writers in the contemporary academy. Yet the queer reading of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" at the heart of Sedgwick's formidable *Epistemology of the Closet* is, at bottom, no more than an elaborate disagreement with the guiding assumption of most previous readings of the story, that the protagonist John Marcher's premonition that a fearful "beast" will one day spring on him arises from his failure to recognize that he "*should have desired* [his female friend] May Bartram."<sup>3</sup>

Sedgwick's reading clearly passes the "So what?" test, since if accepted it would significantly change our view of James's story, and perhaps of our culture's sexual ideologies. Indeed, "So what?" is a question that our field's most successful rhetoricians not only ask themselves all the time but also sometimes write explicitly into their work. In his recent book *Professional Correctness*, for instance, Stanley Fish refutes the assumption of some cultural studies scholars that we subvert disciplinary authority if we show that academic disciplines are not licensed by God or nature but are "socially constructed." According to three economics professors quoted by Fish,

"The ramifications of disciplinary practices . . . are often contradictory and complex rather than coherent, the contending visions of theory and practice disparate rather than merging into . . . unity."

To all of which I say, "So what?" The fact that a self-advertised unity is really a grab-bag of disparate elements held together by chicken-wire, or by shifting political and economic alliances, or by a desire to control the production and dissemination of knowledge, does not make the unity disappear; it merely shows what the unity is made of, not that it isn't one.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, Fish is a master of this kind of argumentation, and the particular point of contention in this case would lose most nonacademics. But Fish's general strategy

would not be beyond the reach of undergraduates if we as a profession were to be more forthright (even formulaic) about it: find something out there you can disagree with, restate it, and put in your own oar.

In both the statement of purpose and the writing sample, then, we've found that what differentiates unsuccessful from successful graduate applicants (and subsequent professionals) is that whereas the former do close readings in a vacuum, the latter relate such work to larger professional and public sphere conversations that they wish to enter and influence. This strategy is effective because it suggests that the applicant is already a professional in the making, if not a finished product. As is often the case both inside and outside academe, success depends on bootstrapping: showing that you've already begun to do what it is that you want to learn how to do.

You need only look back over the examples we have given of MAPH's rhetorical do's and don't's to see that the principles behind them are not rarified or even particularly "academic" in the specialized sense, but rather are principles that would serve one well in many walks of life. They are calculated, in other words, to produce not only better academics but better citizens: people who can enter the conversations not just of the academy but of the public sphere. To the objection that what we are promoting seems like the precocious seduction of undergraduates into the world of high academic theory, we reply (somewhat sheepishly) that in fact our program more closely resembles the truisms of traditional rhetorical instruction.

We realize, however, that notwithstanding this admission of retro sensibility, our argument may still seem wildly implausible to some. It clearly challenges, for instance, the widespread assumption that academic professionalism discourages or even prohibits an interest in wider public issues. But as we argued earlier, while this was once the case under the long dominant positivist paradigm, doing important academic research today increasingly depends on the ability to make large claims about culture and ideas. It's simply no longer true, at least in many academic fields, that you become successful and influential by producing narrowly claustrophobic writing that never indicates why it needed to be written in the first place. Common sense alone would dictate that precisely as the objects of our analysis become more specialized (which might, from another perspective, mean more thoroughly researched and complexly interpreted), a greater premium would be placed on the ability to translate special interests for general audiences, whether of one's academic colleagues or of educated nonacademics. It is in this respect that the public intellectual model seems promising not only, as some would have it, for academic opportunists, but for undergraduate and graduate education, as well as for the chances of closing the intellectual gap between them.

For even though our focus here has been on graduate applications, the ultimate import of our argument is that undergraduate education needs to change, now that there is less reason than there once was to protect it from the culture of professional research—when such protectiveness has become impoverishing. We have been

trained to think of undergraduate study as broad and graduate and professional work as narrow, but the reverse may now be closer to the reality, at least in the humanities, with undergraduates performing disconnected exercises in close reading while those at the top of the academic star system write about Michael Jordan in the *New Yorker*, or Monicagate in the *New York Times* (though still performing close readings). If the writing samples submitted with graduate applications are meaningful evidence, then the decontextualized analyses that undergraduates are asked to write in many courses are poor training not just for getting into graduate school but for explaining oneself and persuading others in any career or situation. As noted earlier, many of MAPH's strategies for graduate education were adapted more or less bold-facedly from first-year composition pedagogy. It is one of our hopes in the new generalist climate that specialists in composition and rhetoric, who have notoriously occupied the bottom rung of the academic ladder, will begin to get the respect and emulation they deserve.

Granted, most undergraduates won't know enough about academic conversations to initiate groundbreaking new paradigm shifts in their statements of purpose. It takes advanced training to generalize confidently about the social functions of the arts and the debates over them—that's what graduate school is *for*. Still, in our experience, undergraduates are often more than capable of producing the kind of meta-commentary we urge, which really involves not much more than the basic rhetorical principle that what you say should have something to do with what people around you are saying. The cocktail party provides a simple analogy: people who walk up to a conversation, listen to what's going on in order to find out what the interlocutors are already talking about, then make a contribution to this preexisting conversation generally have much more success than those who walk up, interrupt whoever is currently speaking, and launch into an unrelated discourse about whatever happens to be on their mind.<sup>5</sup> Yet even as college students are informally learning such social skills on the weekends, their courses are too often asking them to do just the opposite with regard to the conversations that make up our culture.

Academic intellectual culture is certainly forbidding in its difficulty, yet in many ways the academy makes its culture *look* more esoteric, specialized, and difficult than it really is or needs to be. The ultimate effect of the kinds of mystification that we have been describing is to make people feel that when they come to a college or a university they have to check their everyday rhetorical and conversational competence at the door. The undergraduate applicants who submit writing samples that are studiously pointless would never think to speak that way in real life. It took them years of education to learn to speak with no context to no one.

To say this may sound denigrating to students, but it is really only to say that most students already have more of the argumentative skills that make for success in the classroom than they often think they have. Unfortunately, their encounter with

the humanities as they are currently taught evidently makes them feel that their everyday argumentative skills don't count and that something more arcane and rarified must be demanded. And although one might hope that this poor intellectual socialization is counteracted by graduate school and a professional career, versions of it often persist all the way to the top of the academic heap. How many questions at academic lectures or conferences, for instance, have less to do with the talk that has just been given than with whatever the questioner happens to be working on at the time? How many talks themselves seem only tangentially related to the announced topic of the conference, or fail to indicate what urgency gave rise to them?

Finally, it may be objected that the kind of advice we are offering would at best only help doctoral applicants compete better against each other for the same limited pot of rewards. What does the competition for scarce resources in doctoral programs have to do with democratizing education as a whole? It would do nothing to increase the pot, which is where the real work is needed. Furthermore, if all applicants were to get the kind of advice we have proposed here, the value of that advice would automatically diminish.

We grant that helping a few graduate applicants compete for diminished resources does nothing to address the larger problem of how to increase those resources and make good the claim of democratic access to higher education. But our failure to make our academic practices more accessible does have a bearing on higher education's current financial crisis. In the boom years that followed World War II, higher education hardly needed to justify itself in order to attract generous financial support. That is obviously no longer the case: even when economic recovery is trumpeted, little of the rising tide makes its way to the backwaters of humanities education and research. Today we need to make a case for ourselves if we hope to maintain some share of social and economic support for the things that we value. Clearly, it is hard to make a case to others when our rationale for what we do is unclear to ourselves. Without, we think, being overly alarmist, we can assert that explaining what we do and why we do it has become crucial to the future of higher education. In this respect, the most beneficial result of asking our students "So what?" and "Who cares?" may be that we finally begin to ask it of ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. On Chicago's MAPH, see Alison Schneider, "Master's Degrees, Once Scorned, Attract Students and Generate Revenues," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (21 May 1999), A12–13. For a discussion of expanded MA degree programs as one solution to the current crisis in the academic job market (and a compelling argument for using the MA as a much-needed link between college and high school teaching), see Michael Bérubé, *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* (New York: New York UP, 1998): 81–86. For another sympathetic account of MAPH, see Jenny Adams, "Jumping into the Culture Wars," *University of Chicago Magazine* (October 1997): 25–29 (available online at <http://www2.uchicago.edu/alumni/alumni.mag/9710/9710jumping.html>).

2. Gerald Graff and James Phelan, eds. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy* (Boston: Bedford, 1995).

3. Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990): 198; italics in original. Andrew was deeply gratified recently when he presented this reading to his American literature survey course and, anxiously asking the students if they thought Sedgwick's interpretation "ruined" the story, was informed that in fact it *made it interesting*.

4. Stanley Fish, *Political Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995): 74. Ironically (in our opinion), Fish's book is an attack on the premise that MAPH is based on, that academic humanists can become public intellectuals without ceasing to act as academics. Clearly he will be right as long as humanists remain poor rhetoricians and teachers of rhetoric, though Fish's own example shows that they (we) can do much better.

5. We echo here a comment by Kenneth Burke that has been widely quoted and endorsed by compositionists in which Burke compares intellectual history to a neverending parlor conversation that as individuals we enter and exit. See Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1957), pp. 95–96.

6. The authors wish to thank Dean Philip Gossett and Professor Larry Rothfield, now co-director of MAPH, for their helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this essay.