Neal A. Lester has always looked beyond his classroom walls, beyond disciplinary definitions, to exemplify the importance of the humanities.

Before arriving at Arizona State University, Lester taught at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, where he became the first tenured African-American faculty member in the English department. He’d travel to rural pockets of the state and give talks to churchgoers or community groups, connecting nuggets of literature to other pieces of culture, like the song lyrics of blues singers.

To Lester, performing what it means to be human felt more important than defining it. He applied those principles when he founded Project Humanities, an Arizona State initiative that pairs students with local citizens for talks, service work, and something called "hacks for humanities." (It’s a 36-hour competition to create a tech product that serves the social good.)

Lester, the project’s director and an English professor, spoke about the project at the recent Modern Language Association conference, in Seattle, where some attendees wrung their hands about the general decline of humanities majors. A sense of weariness...
undergirded many a conversation. Lester sees it differently. He spoke with The Chronicle about the supposed crisis, academic exclusion, and why he doesn’t fret about the numbers.

**When Project Humanities was just an idea, what did you want it to achieve?**

The most immediate concern was, How do we get more English majors? Because at the time, I was serving as dean. The economic downturn was around 2008, 2009. And not just that, but also, What about a degree in humanities? What value would that have? I was being asked to look at some of our language programs to see if any of those could be cut. That was happening at other institutions around the country. My approach was to see how we could market what we do to the public at large so that they understand that the work is not extra, but is quite essential to being a decent and informed citizen.

So I thought, How can I use the model of public humanities to get people to be engaged in such a way that their questioning would be more informed and also would change people’s thinking about humanities? I don’t know that we actually grew English majors. But I do know it was an opportunity to think beyond a major, to think in terms of cross-disciplinary collaboration and research.

But the idea initially came from, How do we address what’s now the cliché of the crisis in the humanities? It seems like there’s always been a crisis in the humanities.

**What do you think when people talk about the crisis in humanities?**

The people who talk about the crisis are usually the people on the inside. What I know now is that’s a slightly less-nuanced way of looking at the world. For me, it really is about, How do we get people to understand the value of humanities work without having to be stymied at trying to define it? I was always bogged down when people asked me to define humanities.

It wasn’t because I couldn’t do it. It was because I didn’t have a model that allowed me to show action rather than stagnant definitions. While I can appreciate a disciplinary approach, that works for people who are inside the academy. So much of trying to bring
people together and get people to support what we do is to step outside of those sometimes rigid and artificial boundaries.

**Could you explain what you mean by a "less-nuanced way of looking at the world"?**

It feels alarmist. Humanists were restricted in our thinking about what humanities could be and what humanities are. My university does a lot of things in the community, but it also engages in national conversations and shows that, even though we’re here in the Southwest and these conversations often take place on the West Coast or the Northeast, we have something to contribute. When we decided to do a program on humanities, I and other team members knew that bringing people to D.C. to talk about the crisis in humanities was going to fall limply, in terms of interest. We got together and thought, What could we do to move away from, you know, throwing our hands up, talking up the sky is falling?

We had to reframe how we were talking about the work that we do. We have to talk about intersectionality. Even though somebody may be a business major or a kinesiology major doesn’t mean that they can’t engage in these conversations about humanist principles and about how we are human.

Not so much with that question that is often at the center of these conversations: What does it mean to be human? I’m bogged down by that because I don’t know what it means not to be human. What I do know is how I am human, and I can assess that and look at ways in which people have demonstrated or not demonstrated whether we are losing our humanity. So for me, the question needed to be more nuanced than reeling off a bunch of disciplines, which is what often happens. That’s when we start excluding people from the conversation.

**Does it feel validating to you that the MLA and other professional organizations are emphasizing this outward-facing work that you’ve always done?**

Absolutely. That’s what’s so ironic. A number of my colleagues restrict their activities just to a classroom on a campus. My audiences have been varied and diverse, and I have had to argue how that kind of work is important because it opens up the possibilities of
people understanding more of what we’re doing. Getting people to understand means that we’re getting people to participate in knowledge creation. That’s not a model that every research institution subscribes to.

It started when I was an assistant professor at the University of Alabama. At the time, I had this traveling talk on Zora Neale Hurston. I essentially took Their Eyes Were Watching God and looked at the talking rituals and put them in historical context of folks who were denied voice, whether it was through chattel slavery or Jim Crow or fighting for the civil-rights movement. I didn’t know at the time that that would become the sort of tagline for Project Humanities: talking, listening, and connecting. Orality, historically, has not been valued in the way that alphabet literacy has.

I traveled all over the state of Alabama. I always had a piece of literature or a text at the core, but I would bring in Aretha Franklin’s songs, Etta James, and Billie Holiday, and show that the literature doesn’t grow out of a vacuum.

**How do you convince the people who are in charge of your future that this work matters?**

Whenever one is a first, there are all these layers of culture and layers of politics. But I don’t think it could have happened if I didn’t have a strong chair who knew the potential was there and that I had actually been productive. I had a book and I had teaching awards.

I had always had this sense that the work that I was doing was "teacherly." I don’t mean that in a condescending way, but I wanted to engage audiences and not exclude them. So I didn’t, and couldn’t, make my language so complicated and so sophisticated that it became what Toni Morrison would later call "dead language," language that’s not intended to communicate with. I read some scholars whose language was quite like that. And I was really worried about that, in that moment, when everybody was so hypnotized by pure theory. Fortunately, we’ve evolved past that. Close readings do matter.

There’s been a lot that I’ve had to contend with as a faculty member of color who has tried to navigate these academic spaces with very little direction from people who look like me and were able to do it.
As a young scholar, the MLA didn’t always feel like it was welcoming. However, the College Language Association, which we fondly call the "colored version of MLA," was. There was just a whole lot of stuff that wasn’t as performative as what many of us saw MLA as. I’m so pleased that now it feels more welcoming. I’m so pleased that "public-facing humanities" is a saying now. But it was not always that way.

**What do you think about the decline in humanities majors?**

I’m not in that position as a department chair or a dean to look at numbers of students. When I was in those positions, everybody was trying to recruit folks. But if you’re taking somebody from an English major to be a political-science major, you still have the student there. The student isn’t leaving the university. So I’m offering that we reframe this notion of just measuring our progress based on numbers.

If we talk about the goal of going to universities, it’s not only that you learn stuff, but you come out as a better person. You don’t have to be an English major to be a better person and to engage with the kinds of things that studying humanities provides.

It’s not just people having these armchair conversations. We have been doing a homeless-outreach program for five years. We distribute clothing, shoes, and toiletries. And I can tell you, we don’t have any specific majors down there. It’s intergenerational. High-school students. Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, retirees. There’s such gratitude, and we call that Humanity 101 in action.

*This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.*

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