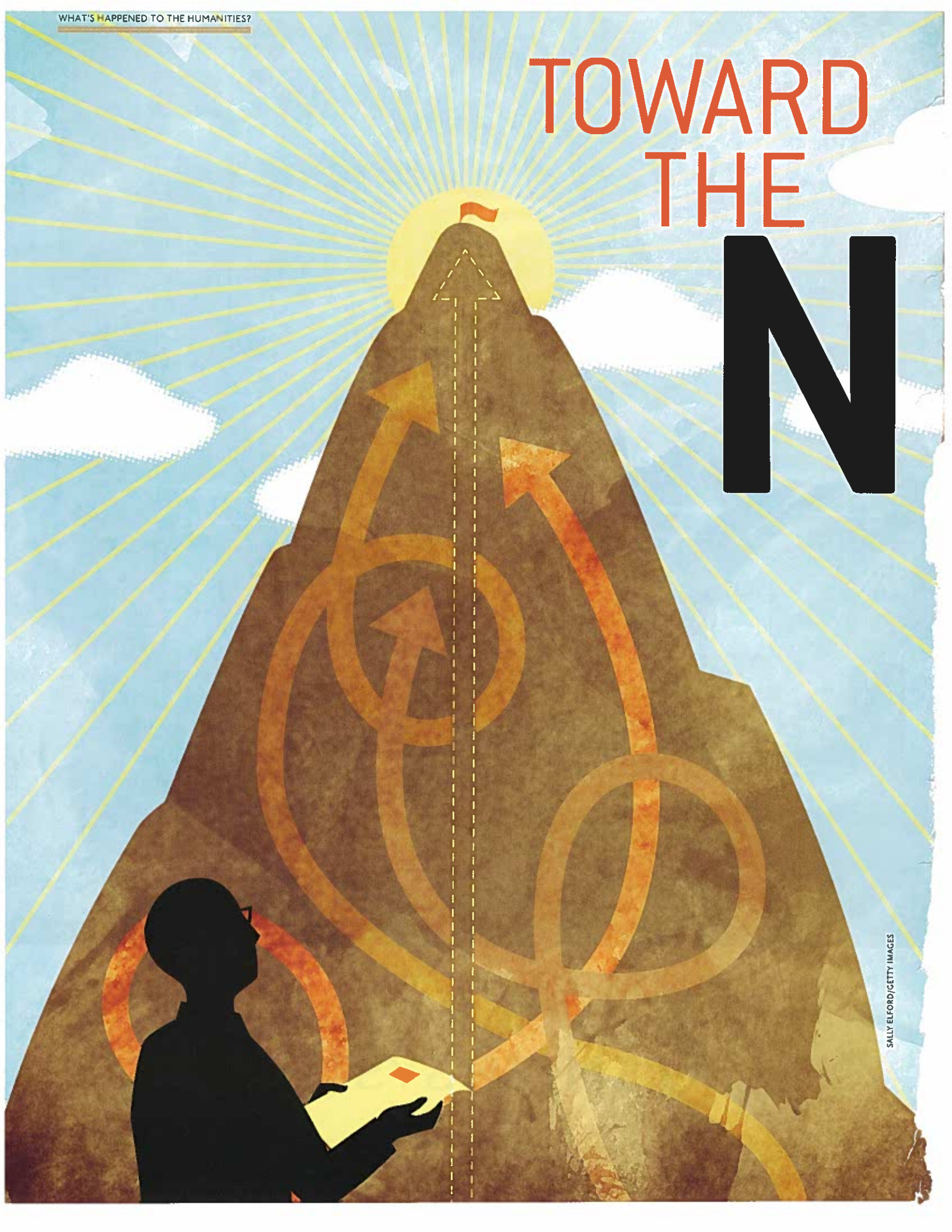


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BY A.J. KOHLHEPP

## *Advanced Humanities Research at Berkshire School*

**Y**ou don't have to look far in the national media to find pronouncements about the humanities' irrelevance and extinction, nor do you have to dig deeply to identify passionate counter-narratives, of which this issue of *Independent School* offers multiple versions. But it is certainly worthwhile to think critically about how the humanities maintain relevance in the current climate and to appraise the value of the humanities in an independent school setting.

At Berkshire School (Massachusetts), a primarily residential institution of 400 students set in a bucolic corner of New England, we are charting a course that highlights the relevance and impact of humanities-based inquiry. Our Advanced Humanities Research program provides our best and brightest students the opportunity to engage in humanities scholarship at the postsecondary level and, while doing so, to put the finishing touches on their preparation to succeed in college and beyond.

## Advancing the Humanities

Berkshire School started a successful Advanced Math-Science Research (AMSR) program in 2006, based on the vision of Kurt Schleunes, who had overseen a similar program at Marlborough School (California). In its original phase, Berkshire School's AMSR program was fairly simple. The director connected promising Berkshire students with mentors at colleges in the vicinity — primarily the University at Albany, which was pushing hard at that time to accentuate lab sciences and nanotechnology. Then he drove our ambitious young scientists to the labs on a weekly basis, checked in to make sure all parties were copacetic, and worked to maintain relationships between this traditional boarding school and these science-minded institutions of higher learning.

Berkshire's AMSR program took a major step forward with the 2012 hiring of April Burch, a scientist with extensive connections in microbiology research. The state-of-the-art laboratory spaces in a brand new math-science building opening that fall provided Berkshire students with new on-site opportunities for research. Regional and national recognition, via successful entry into contests such as Intel and Siemens, followed. Berkshire School was on the



Author A.J. Kohlhepp (center) and students in the Advanced Humanities Research Program at Berkshire School.

map for excellence in mathematical and scientific research at the secondary level.

As AMSR was taking off, a small cadre of educators was dreaming up a humanities-based variation. The school already offered a full slate of classes in the humanities, including two AP English courses; three AP history courses; multiple levels of Spanish, French, Mandarin, and Latin; and single-semester electives in philosophy and art history. But none of these offerings really provided students the opportunity to engage in sustained research and to chart their own course in a chosen field. According to Clay Splawn, Berkshire School's dean of academics, "We wanted to create something that would allow top humanities scholars to do the same caliber of work Berkshire students were demonstrating in AMSR."

But the AMSR model didn't seem to match up well for humanities projects. What would a humanities-based program look like, and who would lead it?

Advanced Humanities Research (AHR) was launched in the fall of 2010, overseen by Evan Clary, English department chair at that time. Our relative geographic isolation proved an obstacle to lining up mentors for the students, as did the lack of equivalent research spaces to the nanotech labs and biotech consortia that had provided points of access for AMSR participants. In addition, the wide variety of disciplines that students were exploring made it difficult to standardize the student outcomes. AHR had been born at Berkshire, but its future in those first few years was anything but assured given larger trends in the educational world and the ever-increasing scrutiny on programming and personnel felt by this and many similar institutions.

## The Evolution of Advanced Humanities Research

I took over as the AHR director in summer 2013 with a mandate to strengthen the program by connecting it more dynamically with initiatives in the postsecondary world and by

clarifying the expectations for student outcomes. By this point, the course follows a well-established trajectory over the course of the year.

In the first quarter, the newly enrolled AHR students — usually six to ten carefully vetted seniors — learn about research methods in the various humanities disciplines from a rotating cast of resident experts. Here are some examples:

- Our resident philosopher helps us to explore *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* and shares a paper that he submitted to a philosophy journal (along with notes from the readers).
- A former professor walks us through the latest humanities offerings in the Williams College course catalog, sharing accounts of his own, his students', and his colleagues' approach to research.
- The director of our music program introduces us to the main approaches to musical scholarship with a unit on Brahms's *Symphony No. 4*.
- An art historian uses a chapter of a textbook to illuminate key trends in art scholarship and to draw attention to key concepts applicable to humanities criticism in all disciplines.

The impetus underlying this series of guest speakers is to expand the students' horizons beyond the traditional *métier*, and methodology, of their course work in English, history, and modern languages. We also use field trips to expand their critical horizons, including trips to Edith Wharton's Berkshire cottage, The Mount; the New York Public Library; the Yale Center for British Art; and the archives and rare book collections of colleges such as Amherst, Trinity, and Williams.

In the second quarter, having developed this basic scholarly foundation, students choose a field of inquiry and build a resource list, with guidance from me and our amazing library director, Nancy Florio. Then they start to read, thinking carefully



about both the text(s) they wish to consider and the approach(es) they will employ in interpreting these texts. They conclude the quarter by creating an annotated bibliography and a list of essential questions.

Once students have identified their areas of focus, I connect each of them with an off-campus mentor, usually college professors with publications in relevant subject areas and/or methodologies that complement the students' research. In addition to professors at regional colleges — Williams College and College of the Holy Cross have proven especially fruitful — we have made connections as far afield as a Hitler expert at University of Colorado–Colorado Springs; a systems analyst at West Point; a Hesse scholar at University of California–Santa Barbara; a cognitive theorist at Dartmouth; and an analytic philosopher at the University of Notre Dame. Besides a care pack-

age delivered in May, these generous scholars receive nothing more than the intrinsic reward for helping acolytes find their way.

Over the course of the third quarter, students compose, with oversight from me and their off-campus mentors, an initial draft of a paper. These first drafts generally end up in the 15-20 page range and constitute a good, but incomplete, effort toward serious scholarship. In the fourth quarter, students revise their papers to presentation quality and compose separate abstracts and acknowledgments pages, working with peer feedback and continuing guidance from their mentors and from me. Finally, they create and deliver presentations at Berkshire's end-of-the-year Advanced Research and Independent Study Exhibition (ARISE).

Students interested in taking part in the program apply during the late winter as they consider their overall

program for the following academic year. The application process, which includes recommendations from current teachers and a brief personal statement laying out the applicant's interests, helps to screen out any students who in all likelihood aren't prepared to succeed in AHR. Success in a variety of humanities courses is a prerequisite, as is a well-developed executive skill set, given that most of these students take AHR in addition to a full slate of more traditional class offerings. The class usually includes between six and ten members, most of whom are seniors, in a single section.

Students apply for a variety of reasons. Derrick, who applied concepts from social psychology to analyze freestyle skiing, notes, "I knew it would both challenge and engage me in a way that no other class at Berkshire might. I couldn't turn down the opportunity to take a class that would allow me to

## ADVANCED HUMANITIES RESEARCH PROJECTS 2014–2016

STUDENT	TOPIC OF CAPSTONE PROJECT	FACULTY READERS
Julia Allyn	<i>Fate in Ancient Greece, Elizabethan England &amp; 20th-Century France</i>	Keith McPartland, Williams College
Liza Jane Branch	<i>Female Artistic Participation in the Minimalist Movement</i>	Mary Sheriff, University of North Carolina
Peter Dunn	<i>The Development of Christianity in 4th-Century Rome</i>	Thomas Martin, College of the Holy Cross
Peter Giordano	<i>American Political Rhetoric After September 11</i>	Jonathan Silverman, University of Massachusetts–Lowell
Lucy Hollister	<i>Gender Representation(s) in Popular Music</i>	Jennifer Scanlon, Bowdoin College
Hannah Honan	<i>Women's Lives Under Queens Elizabeth &amp; Victoria</i>	Mary Conley, College of the Holy Cross
Reid Lemker	<i>An Analysis of Study Abroad Programs Through Cognitive Theory</i>	Sean Kang, Dartmouth College
Noah Wilson	<i>Something Rather Than Nothing: An Interdisciplinary Exploration</i>	Peter van Inwagen, University of Notre Dame
Chris Zaffanella	<i>Psychoanalytic Investigation of Adolf Hitler</i>	Frederick Coolidge, University of Colorado–Colorado Springs
Derrick Burt	<i>On the Edge: A Social Psychology Analysis of Freestyle Skiing</i>	Jonathan Silverman, University of Massachusetts–Lowell
Noah Faison	<i>The Contested Construction of China's Soft Power Profile</i>	Sam Crane, Williams College
Brooks Hamilton	<i>Edward Said's Orientalism and Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha</i>	Gunter Gottschalck, University of California–Santa Barbara
Annie Hubbard	<i>Walton Ford's Unique Status in the American Art World</i>	Karen Kurczynski, University of Massachusetts–Amherst
Larry Matt	<i>Pearl Harbor: A Day of Infamy or a Platform for Deceit?</i>	Harold Goldberg, Sewanee: The University of the South
Sam Reagan	<i>The Politics of Language in Rwanda's Genocide</i>	Chris Cook, University of Pittsburgh

take complete control over my work.” Samantha, who explored the rhetorical choices in narratives surrounding the Rwandan genocide, offers a more pragmatic rationale: “By the end of my junior year I had already exhausted the writing options Berkshire had to offer. I thought AHR was a great option to improve my writing skills through a different forum.”

Students likewise offer a variety of takeaways from their experience in AHR. Noah, who investigated the soft power implications of China’s media and Internet control, appreciates “the inner workings of the research process: finding scholarly articles, reaching out

10 and 15 prospective students will express interest in AHR each cycle. (AMSR, by contrast, will field three or four times as many inquiries.) Their particular interests vary, but their intellectual ambition is a common denominator. Sophia, a current 10th-grader from Mexico City, notes that, “When I applied to Berkshire in fall 2014, AHR was one of the programs I was looking forward to because it focuses on subjects that have to do with human behavior, thoughts, and beliefs.” While adding AHR to the course catalog doesn’t bring a huge spike in the applicant pool, it can help a school identify strong candidates who are eager to

the board of trustees: “A course like Advanced Humanities Research is a valuable offering at an independent school. Students learn how to engage their intellectual curiosity through the kinds of research and analysis more typically experienced on the postsecondary level.”

Those of us who are already drinking, or even mixing and serving, the humanities Kool-Aid will not look for extrinsic payoffs for this work, but educational leaders and boards will be interested to learn that AHR also looks like a winning bet from the college admissions perspective. According to Shep Shanley, a senior member of the admissions team at Northwestern University, this kind of program can provide a means for applicants to differentiate themselves from the mass of accomplished academicians. “Two things are impactful to us on the college admissions side,” he observes. “We value the fact that AHR is a selective program within your school as this highlights the students’ previous accomplishments and the faculty’s high regard for them. In addition, the expectation of college-level research, completed in conjunction with a current professor, speaks really well toward the prospects of these applicants.”

This kind of course also connects well with contemporary educational initiatives, many of which are enumerated in Berkshire School’s newly formulated strategic plan. “Advanced Humanities Research hits on so many of those priorities,” posits Splawn. “It engages communication as students work hard to share their ideas with the broader community. It hits the commitment to interdisciplinary studies and intellectual diversity by giving students great freedom to explore cultures and ideas that might not fit into the ‘mainstream’ curriculum.”

Pieter Mulder, head of school, calls the program “an inspiring model for our entire academic program due to the rigor and authenticity of each student’s academic explorations; the intellectual partnership she or he forms with an outside mentor; and

“ I ULTIMATELY LEARNED THAT MY BEST, MOST MEANINGFUL WORK COMES FROM TOPICS THAT I HAVE A GENUINE INTEREST IN. ”

to professors, and collaborating with other scholars ... to bridge my own ideas with those of others.” Brooks, who synthesized aspects of Orientalism to see Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* in a more nuanced light, expresses “complete confidence,” given that “I now have experience with college-level research and writing.” Derrick offers the most encouraging epiphany of all: “I ultimately learned that my best, most meaningful work comes from topics that I have a genuine interest in.”

#### Lessons Learned in Leading AHR

Like most worthy subjects in the humanities, the relationship between program and institution can be interpreted from a variety of perspectives. On the front end, admissions data from recent years suggest that between

move beyond the traditional academic disciplines and chart their own course.

The program also resonates well with another important constituency: parents. Lisa Warren-Kruger notes, “This course presented the chance for my daughter to independently pursue her intellectual interests beyond typical high school class offerings. The focus of her study propelled my daughter to spend her first semester studying in London,” continuing to engage in the kinds of interdisciplinary questions that had propelled her research at Berkshire. The short version: “Her passion grew into a life-changing experience which has prepared her for rigorous humanities courses at Hamilton College and life beyond.”

Warren-Kruger offers another perspective, this one as a member of

the opportunity to exhibit this work in front of the Berkshire community and the wider scholarly world.”

Jonathan Silverman, a professor of American studies at University of Massachusetts–Lowell, has served as an AHR mentor for three years running. He offers this observation: “What strikes me about the Advanced Humanities Program is its commitment to asking interesting and important questions. It says to me that the school values intellectual development and thought; more importantly, AHR shows the school modeling a type of engagement with the world. We can only answer questions by asking them, and doing so, we not only engage our world but change it.”

### Looking Ahead, Getting Ahead

In terms of programmatic goals for AHR, I hope to raise the profile by featuring student discoveries on social media and identifying further opportunities for them to submit and exhibit

their work, such as MIT’s Inspire competition and the *Concord Review* essay contest. (Berkshire can already boast a regional laureate for The Cum Laude Society’s annual essay contest, which Unyime Udoh won in 2012 with a Freudian analysis of Le Corbusier’s public and private sides.)

Looking into the future, it is easy to conceive of AHR as both a proving ground for traditional scholarly achievement and a laboratory for new academic initiatives. This double meaningfulness comes about as a combination of curricular flexibility (there’s nothing that we have to cover and nothing that we can’t investigate, should it seem relevant to our collective project); postsecondary focus (where “knowledge” and inquiry are much more open to innovation than at the secondary level); and rigorous expectations (each AHR graduate has created what amounts to an honors thesis). In that regard, programs of this sort represent an exciting new offering in

independent schools’ collective curricula at a time when many of the time-worn or hidebound academic assumptions are open to question.

Having graduated half a dozen humanitarians in spring 2016, I will be well underway with a whole new cadre at the time of publication. I guess I see myself as a kind of *sherpa* in advanced humanities research, the wizened Tenzing Norgay to these aspiring Edmund Hillarys. I know the terrain pretty well by now and can help the students to navigate the most treacherous passes along the way. Each scholar ends up summiting his or her own peak, but one thing is true for all: the viewpoint from their pinnacles is pretty sweet.

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