

Letters of Support

for NEH Challenge Grant proposal “Integrating the Humanities and Sciences: A Campus-wide Program at Binghamton University that Addresses a General Problem in Higher Education”

Because our proposal addresses such a general theme and is intended as a model for higher education, we invited comments from a number of external authorities. We chose senior authorities in a position to comment broadly on the “Two Cultures” problem and those of all ranks who are at the forefront of the New Humanities movement. Excerpts are provided below and the full letters are available upon request.

“I cannot even imagine a proposal for the NEH more likely to make a significant impact, both immediate and local and long-term, national and international, than David Sloan Wilson and Leslie Heywood’s “Integrating the Humanities and the Sciences”... This proposal is history in the making. I expect it to set a new course for the arts and sciences.”

--Brian Boyd, University Distinguished Professor of English, University of Aukland, NZ. Leading biographer, critic and editor of Vladimir Nabokov. Author of the forthcoming *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition and Fiction* and co-editor of the forthcoming *Evolutionary Approaches to Literature and Film: A Reader in Art and Science*.

[EvoS is] one of the most impressive academic programs of evolutionary studies anywhere in the world... I can think of no more interesting intellectual endeavor than the study of the art/science interface....I give my strongest support to “Integrating the Humanities and Sciences”....

--Stephen Brown, Assistant Professor of Psychology, McMasters University. Co-Editor of *The Origin of Music*.

“The EvoS program answers directly to what I consider the most important challenge facing higher education—integrating the humanities with the evolutionary social sciences....One hears constantly now about a “crisis in the humanities”—a crisis in morale, in direction, in public standing, in student interest, and in financial support. The EvoS program offers a practical solution for that crisis. I could not more strongly or sincerely urge support for any program.”

--Joseph Carroll, Curators’ Professor of English, University of Missouri-St. Louis. Author of *Evolution and Literary Theory* and *Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature*.

Your proposal is a strong and subtle document that lays out the “two cultures” problem in a new and highly convincing way...In its extreme, relativistic, form, constructivism has proved to be a source of antagonism between the humanities and sciences. Rather than denounce it outright, however, you and your collaborators have seen fit to salvage what is valuable in it.. Thanks to your EvoS program, Binghamton is widely regarded as the premier university exploring relations between biology and the arts...

--Frederick Crews, Professor Emeritus of English, University of California at Berkeley. Author of *Skeptical Engagements*, *The Memory Wars*, *Unauthorized Freud*, and *Follies of the Wise*.

For several decades I have been a largely independent scholar for whom such a program would have been a dream come true when I was an undergraduate. I am perhaps the first scholar to look at the arts comprehensively as products of biological evolution. For many years it was difficult to find encouragement or approval for what I was trying to do. Now that I have persevered, I find that audiences to whom I speak are highly receptive to my message. In my opinion, the project envisioned at Binghamton should be implemented. It is visionary and liberating.

--Ellen Dissanayake, Author of *What is Art For?*, *Homo aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, and *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*.

As a historian, I have again and again found myself up against evolutionary questions the answers to which lie completely outside the bounds of the social sciences: What attracts us to war? What are the evolutionary roots of our intense sociality? Through persistence and journalistic ingenuity, I have usually been able to find the appropriate evolutionary biologists to talk to. But there is currently little institutional support or framework for such cross-disciplinary conversations, which are, in some settings, even discouraged. So I welcome this proposal as a step toward a much richer and broader-ranging study of the human condition-- embracing our prehistory as well as our history, our biology as well as our sociology. I should add that I have great confidence that Wilson and Heywood will carry out this proposal with all the requisite diplomacy and respect for existing disciplines.

--Barbara Ehrenreich, Author of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*, *For Her Own Good: 100 Years of Expert Advice on Women*, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*, and *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*.

Only a few weeks ago, in the April 11th issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The Death of Literary Studies" presented a collection of comments generated by William Deresiewicz's article in *The Nation* (online March 11, 2008) whose burden was that literary study was fast losing its vital juices, seeming increasingly irrelevant to the needs of today's students. What was needed, the commentaries implied or stated, was a new paradigm that would return literature from the margins to which it has been relegated to a position closer to the center it once held. My sense is that the paradigm so badly needed must involve the sciences... The Binghamton project is to be commended for its pioneering attempt to lift the humanities (and to a lesser extent the sciences themselves) from their dogmatic slumbers into the contemporary world, a world divided between cutting edge work in evolution and neuroscience on the one hand and the superstitions of Intelligent Design and disbelief in the anthropogenic hastening of global warming on the other. It looks to be an ambitious and ideal program for support by NEH.

-- Harold Fromm, Visiting Scholar in English, University of Arizona. Author of *Academic Capitalism and Literary Value* (1991), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), and *From Ecology to Consciousness* (forthcoming, 2009).

C. P. Snow famously described the splitting of the intellectual world into the two cultures of the sciences and humanities as "sheer loss to us all." And forty years later, the near-

total segregation of knowledge communities (in an increasingly separate and unequal system) continues to impoverish both sides....Heywood is a prolific, agile, big-thinking scholar with proven talent for interdisciplinary work. Wilson is one of the great evolutionary theorists of his generation, and he has demonstrated a unique ability to "trespass" in traditional humanities preserves like religion and literature without annoying the natives. This is an incredibly ambitious and needful initiative. Heywood and Wilson are setting out to do nothing less than demonstrate that the big wall separating the humanities and sciences has no substance. It is a figment—a failure—of our imaginations.

-- **Jonathan Gottschall, Assistant Professor of English, Washington & Jefferson College. Author of *The Rape of Troy: Evolution, Violence, and the World of Homer* (2008) and *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* (2008).**

In an academic climate where researchers are under pressure to be ever more specialized, David Sloan Wilson and Leslie Heywood are proposing a bold, interdisciplinary program for integrating Science and the Humanities. It is hard to say who will gain more, the scientists who will gain new insights into the history and development of both ideas in their fields of research and the biases inherent in them, or scholars of history and literature who will gain a deeper understanding of not just *how* but *why* humans generate music, art, and literature. Ultimately, the biggest winners will probably be the students who will have a more comprehensive and meaningful framework for understanding how the disparate courses required for an undergraduate degree fit together. I strongly support this initiative.

-- **Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, author of *Mother Nature: A history of mothers, infants, and natural selection* (1999) and *Mothers and Others: The origin of emotionally modern humans* (forthcoming in 2009).**

I'm writing to offer you my whole-hearted support for the project, "Integrating the Humanities and Sciences" ... I have been skeptical about many of the initiatives emanating in particular from Sociobiologists and now Evolutionary Psychologists. But it seems to me that the proposal you and Professor Heywood are making addresses just the problems these other programs have not managed well, and that it is one of the most exciting attempts to integrate study of science with study of the humanities that I have seen in my very long career. I am excited by it and believe it can become the leading edge in a development that deserves national attention.

--**George Levine, Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University and Distinguished Scholar in Residence, New York University. Author of *How to Read the Victorian Novel, Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* and *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World.***

I am happy to offer my unqualified support for David Sloan Wilson and Leslie Heywood's proposal for a project at the Evolutionary Studies Program at Binghamton to integrate the sciences with the humanities. This is clearly an idea whose time has come.... These connections hold the potential for an explosion of research that could re-energize the humanities and engage scholars for decades....If I were to be asked to advise a dean or university president as to which areas of scholarship are the academic equivalent of growth stocks, these would be my picks... [Binghamton] university seems to me to be better poised to expand into this area than some of the older and more hidebound

universities. As far as I can see, Wilson & Heywood's proposal is an exciting opportunity for the NEH and for Binghamton, and I endorse the project with unqualified enthusiasm.

--Steven Pinker, Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology, Harvard University. Author of *How the Mind Works*, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, and *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*.

I have enormous respect for the things that have already been achieved at Binghamton University and I use the EVOS program as a model when discussing these issues with colleagues... I am thrilled by the promise of this new project and am delighted to be able to write in support... The bringing-together of the humanities and sciences is going to be one of the great intellectual projects of the early decades of the twenty-first century. EVOS provides the essential matrix that will be vital to this success of this new and more ambitious initiative. I have the greatest enthusiasm for this project and give my unreserved support to the application for an NEH challenge. The program will be a model for us all.

--Daniel L. Smail, Professor of History, Harvard University. Author of *Imaginary Cartographies: Possession and Identity in Late Medieval Marseille* and *On Deep History and the Brain*.

Like you, I am convinced that there should be no artificial lines separating the sciences and humanities...The most important goal, in my opinion, is creating structures and places where those who wish to cross boundaries (and there are many such individuals) can meet and work together...Being at the [Santa Fe] Institute on a long term basis has made me realize more than ever how limited our universities have become. Despite the lip service that administrators pay to interdisciplinary research, the faculty are rigidly channeled into doing narrow disciplinary science, and those who attempt to break out of the mold are penalized in various ways. Thus, I applaud your attempt to create innovative solutions that will remove such barriers to advancing knowledge.

--Peter Turchin, Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. Author of *Historical Dynamics: Why states Rise and Fall*, *War and Peace* and *War: The Life Cycle of Imperial Nations*, and *Secular Cycles*.

I've read the summary of your proposal for EvoS, and I am enthusiastically in favor of it—the more so because of my familiarity with your own ground-breaking research and popular writing in the domain between science and the humanities. This program is precisely what is needed not only to close the Two-Cultures gap, but also to bring a new excitement to ideas, on the most fundamental issues; to the broadest possible range of college students.

--Edward O. Wilson, University Professor Emeritus, Harvard University. Author of *Sociobiology*, *On Human Nature*, *Consilience*, *The Future of Life*, and other books.