



MUSE

The official newsletter of the Humanities Division
Brandeis University



Message from the Head of the Division

Dear friends of the humanities, including students (undergraduate and graduate), faculty colleagues, staff, and those outside Brandeis who care about the disciplines of the humanities and how they impact our lives,

October has been a beautiful month of fairly warm weather and colorful foliage, even as we are facing midterms, writing deadlines, and Covid-19 fatigue. I wish you all well as you all continue bravely to finish out this difficult and sometimes isolating semester. I am very aware that many of you are facing unprecedented challenges every day.

For a slight change of pace from recent topics taken up by MUSE, Madeleine Cahn '21 (hereafter MC, Lead Undergraduate Departmental Representative [UDR] for the Division of the Humanities with majors in the Departments of Classical Studies and Mathematics and a minor in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies) interviewed our *one* University Professor in the Division of the Humanities, Professor Jonathan Sarna, the Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History.

Madeleine was curious about what a University Professor does and represents (as were other UDRs and GDRs [Graduate Department Representatives] with whom I spoke), so we thought we'd share what Madeleine learned. Professor Sarna has been at the university for a long time (since 1990), so he has a long perspective on the history of our university, and his own story touches on many issues relevant in today's world and relevant to the mission of Brandeis University. We hope you enjoy what he had to say.

With all best wishes,

Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow
Head of the Division of the Humanities
The Key and Hortense Kaiserman Endowed Chair in the Humanities
Professor of Classical Studies

Interview with Prof. Jonathan Sarna

MC: 1. What does being a University Professor¹ entail, and how does it impact your life?

JS: Let me say first of all that it was a tremendous honor, one of the great honors of my life to have been selected as University Professor. There have been only five in the whole history of the university. One of the people whom I most respect at Brandeis, Professor David Hackett Fisher, until his retirement was University Professor, and to think that I have been given the same title was humbling. Now, my understanding is that the original hope was that University Professors would be models for the whole faculty, the kind of scholars who reach a broad and international audience, who have an international reputation, and who still, at Brandeis, have engagement with students and participate in activities that professors on campus do. Professors Irv Epstein, Eve Marder, and Anita Hill, who are also University Professors, are truly models of their crafts.

As it turned out, within a year of inviting me to be a University Professor, the university also asked me to direct the Schusterman Center, and obviously holding this position leaves less time for creative scholarship and some of the things I had hoped to do as a University Professor. Nevertheless, I have maintained my scholarship, because it is very, very important to me to do so. I hope to publish in 2021 both a single-author book and a co-edited volume, so I still do have an active research agenda.

No written rules exist for what a University Professor does, except, in a way, to be exemplary as a scholar and as a representative of the university, and I guess I still try to do that. Unfortunately, even when one is a University Professor there are only twenty-four hours in a day, and one tries to balance all of the different demands. I do very much have a sense that the university has put me in a certain position, however, and I try to ask myself at key moments “Is this what a University Professor should be doing?” Even when I speak out on occasional issues, it’s really with a sense that I am speaking as a University Professor.

MC: 2. As the one active University Professor in the Division of the Humanities, do you see yourself as a champion of the humanities? If so, what do you do to strengthen the humanities at Brandeis and in the world?

JS: I certainly see myself as a champion of Jewish studies or Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, which has been my home, and where I have played a very central role for more than thirty years by building the department and by trying to ensure that the department lives up to its reputation. We have tried to appoint faculty worthy of one of the great departments in the whole history of Jewish studies in the United States.

It’s no secret that I have championed the appointment of someone who will be central in the teaching of Bible at Brandeis. It seems to me that one cannot understand the humanities without some sense of the Bible, which has been fundamental to much of our literature and many aspects of the humanities. Even though Bible is not my own field, I have strongly supported building up Bible studies, and I would say that I very much want us to hire someone who views the Bible and understands the Bible as part of the humanities. In this sense, I very much feel that I have played that role, and I have been very happy to see the department make appointments of certain crossover figures who simultaneously know the links, say, between early Christianity and Classical Studies and even Egyptian studies.

¹ The following are the University Professors at Brandeis:
 Irv Epstein (CHEM) Division of Science
 David Hackett Fischer (HIST, Emeritus) Division of the Social Sciences
 Anita Hill (Heller and WGSS) Division of the Social Sciences
 Eve Marder (NEUR) Division of Science
 Jonathan Sarna (NEJS) Division of the Humanities

With interdisciplinary appointments I feel I have been supporting Brandeis in its role as a small *research* university. That is, we still need to make the creation of new knowledge part of what faculty are supposed to be doing here. In the areas of study where we offer the PhD, we need to strive to have faculty who are really the best in the world, if possible, at what they are doing, people who will extend scholarship in new directions. As a University Professor I can help shape our university both at the level of the Division of the Humanities and within my department.

MC: 3. During this difficult and uncertain time, in the United States in particular, do you feel your position as University Professor has a particular role to play in the community in terms of addressing injustices in our society?

JS: I think that there has long been a debate, especially here at Brandeis, but not exclusively, over whether the role of a scholar is to be dispassionate in terms of his or her scholarship or rather whether the role of a scholar is to be extraordinarily passionate to the extent that that scholar is an activist. Obviously to some extent, on the one hand, both are true. I have long been an activist on behalf of the field of American Jewish history, which I have dedicated my life to promoting and making more scholarly and to opening up new areas of the field and really advancing the field in many ways, which is one of the things I'm most proud of. When I look at where the field was when I started, with almost no university positions, and look at it today, I feel the field has advanced.

On the other hand, it can be quite dangerous for a faculty member to have a political agenda that can, intentionally or unintentionally distort what one is doing. More than some, I have been an advocate for understanding both sides of every issue, both in the classroom and in my scholarship, and trying hard to understand even those with whom I do not sympathize.

I have very much tried to do two things during this Covid-19 period. Number one, with the pivot to Zoom, I personally have done quite a number of Zoom lectures, discussions, and so forth in the sense that people are home and this provides quality content and education. At the Schusterman Center we pivoted to produce lots of Zoom programs—this year probably a dozen or more for the same purpose. I have also done a little more writing for popular audiences: *The Conversation* and Jewish presses like *Tablet* or the *Forward* or *JTA*.

At a time when the question of what is “truth” has become so central in American society, faculty have a stake in explaining what the lines are between truth and falsehood, and how we know, and why we think as we do and so on. In the past year I've done more writing than I usually do in these non-academic venues, and it does seem to me that this is a responsibility I hold. I never was too comfortable with those who insisted we were in a post truth era, or with those who laughed that there was no such thing as “truth” with a capital T. If the last four years have taught us anything, it is how dangerous the notion that no truth exists, that truth is whatever someone wants it to be—how dangerous, that is, when falsehoods are translated into governmental policy.

I think that faculty have a responsibility to try and help our students and the wider public better understand what truth entails, how we endeavor to find it, and that we write about these matters. We shall never fully succeed in the goal of knowing “the Truth,” but at least we as humanists can try. Humanists seek to know everything about something and something about everything, which actually is the credo that I was taught, and I have really tried hard to live by this credo. Of course, nobody will know everything about something or something about everything. As knowledge has expanded, we become ever more aware of the limitations of our knowledge. Still, we should strive to be so broad that we know something about everything, and nevertheless so expert that we know something about everything. This goal is still an important goal, albeit always unattainable. I feel in a way the same about “truth”. It may be unattainable, but I like to think we strive for it.