



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

January 27, 2016

One More Human Trait: What makes us human? Is it our brain, rationality, language, our ability to design, appreciate beauty or translate the secrets of nature? According to developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello, co-director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, it is the fact that “[humans alone are capable of shared intentionality](#).” That is, “they intuitively grasp what another person is thinking and act toward a common goal.” “This supremely human cognitive ability, Tomasello says, launched our species on its extraordinary trajectory. It forged language, tools and cultures — stepping-stones to our colonization of every corner of the planet.” According to the research, cooperation is the one trait that is essentially human. Is there really only one trait that explains the differences between humans and other species? How do you balance these human traits in your own lives?

Essential Education: Last week, I described the effort in New Mexico to facilitate credit transfer and articulation. A big component of that effort, and one that stands on its own, is the examination and revamping of the State General (Essential) Education core. Since then, HED Secretary Damron held [a webinar](#) to explain the initiative and is scheduled to meet with our Faculty Senate in the near future. In the meantime, I encourage you to become more engaged in the discussion and to look at resources (you can begin with [AAC&U reports](#)).

Another interesting resource, and one that has been sent to me by many of you this past week, is the [Open Syllabi initiative](#) and the [Open Syllabus project](#). One of the first steps to understand our state’s essential education curriculum, and to move toward a common course numbering, is to collect the syllabi of our lower-level courses (from all 32 higher education institutions in New Mexico) and identify common learning outcomes. The Open Syllabi project has done the same and currently contains more than one million syllabi. Once collected, it becomes possible to conduct analytics research on the documents to find common traits. For example, it turns out that Strunk & White’s Elements of Style is the most popular book listed in more than a million college syllabi. As an aside, I learned that “because the word *syllabus* is formed in Latin by mistake, the Latinate plural form *syllabi* might be considered a hypercorrection. The Oxford English Dictionary, however, admits both *syllabuses* and *syllabi* as the plural form.”

The Cost of Higher Education: Once again, ‘tis the season to start examining the cost and value of higher education. Whether you believe that education is a public or personal good, and whether you believe its benefits can be translated into economic values or not, the national and state conversations invariably veer into the financial models and challenges of (public) higher education, despite attempts to explain the [full menu of benefits of college](#). The complexity of the subject — including [the costs of higher education](#), and [changes in state funding](#) — can make it difficult to assess the merits of competing opinions and essays. A good starting point to understand the background and challenges facing higher education (financial and otherwise) is a recent [report from Denver University](#). I encourage you to read the short report critically and to attempt to answer some of the questions posed at the end.

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