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Report to the Council

**2012 Annual Meeting
American Council of Learned Societies
Friday, May 11, 2012
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

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I welcome these annual reports to the Council as an occasion both to comment on broad trends and to highlight our efforts of the past year. Today, it's a special pleasure to begin by asking you to join me in congratulating our colleague Earl Lewis on his appointment as president of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. I hope Earl won't think it presumptuous if we share a wee bit of the pride in his selection, just as we did when President Obama placed the National Humanities Medal on both our current board chair, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and our board colleague, Teofilo Ruiz.

Earl begins as Mellon president next year; until then, Don Randel will continue at the helm. There will be future opportunities to pay tribute to Don and to thank him for his leadership, but I can't let this occasion pass without honoring his vision. Only six years ago, he spoke eloquently to this group at the joint ACLS/AAU Humanities Convocation, and Don has continued to be a distinctive voice on matters dear to our hearts. In the Foundation's most recent annual report, he notes, somewhat ruefully, the distinctiveness of the institution Earl will lead.

The activities of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation can be described very simply. We support work in the humanities and the arts through grants to institutions of higher education, performing arts organizations, museums, libraries, and institutions similarly committed to work in these fields. We feel increasingly lonely.

Don spotlights the shortsightedness that abounds in many debates and decisions concerning higher education:

With the economy again growing, we continue as a nation to disinvest in our future and to disinvest in ourselves. This will eventually take its toll on the economy and on our civic and intellectual life. It will furthermore increase the already growing income disparity that underlies many of our social ills and that, in other nations, has continually led to political unrest.

And he crisply asserted the importance of the scholar-teacher, the true interconnectedness of good teaching and research, as the fulcrum of effective education. As he puts it,

“It is perhaps quite simply unfair to expect the faculty to develop steadily in their students the instinct for discovery and the thrill of it while foreswearing any continuing experience of it themselves.”

In announcing Earl’s appointment, Don Randel stated that “Earl knows the values of the Mellon Foundation, and he shares them.” Chief among those values is the conviction that the humanities are not just of utilitarian value—although they most certainly are—but that they are valuable in and of themselves. We, too, share those values and hope to work with all who do to advance that cause.

I wonder if Andrew Mellon himself, titan of business and secretary of the treasury, might have been interested in our effort this afternoon to explore how the humanities can help us understand economic behavior. People don’t often think of economics and the humanities under the same heading, in the same room, or in conversation with each other. That’s the point of the panel. A gulf is too often assumed, one that did not always exist. After all, the American Economic Association was one of the founding societies of ACLS. The Association’s current executive director, John Siegfried, has been a most effective and collegial member of our Conference of Administrative Officers. The AEA’s delegate, Charlotte Kuh, is a stalwart member of our board. There’s no doubt that ACLS is stronger for the presence of these economists.

The Executive Committee of the Delegates chose this topic with great prescience, for we’ve seen governments fall and presidents turned out of office by the most pervasive economic uncertainty since the 1930s. Great projects are being sorely tested by this strain: the European Union surely, and perhaps the social safety net as we know it. Some commentators predict the collapse of business models in our world of higher education. In this view, residential liberal arts colleges are particularly vulnerable; the graduate school in the humanities, for its part, has long been overbuilt and oversold. The great gothic buildings and verdant campuses of all of higher education may dissolve into a pool of URLs for distance learning and “badges,” not degrees or diplomas, earned for short-term academic study.

Amid all these worries, I can assure you that ACLS is not about to be undone. Fifteen years ago, John D’Arms spoke to the ACLS Annual Meeting as president-designate and proposed a sustained effort to increase our capacity to serve scholarship. Two wars and two recessions later, how have we done? Fairly well, thank you. As you heard from the reports of Charlotte Kuh and Nicole Stahlmann, we are bringing money in and moving it out in quantity and at a high velocity.

It’s comforting to note that we have just been assured by Moody’s Investors Services that our credit remains classed at A1, probably the highest rating an entity of our size can receive. Among the points made in their notice to the market:

- The A1 rating and stable outlook reflect the Council’s stable market position.
- FY 2011’s total financial resource base was \$117.4 million along with a low debt burden of \$3.9 million.
- Healthy operating performance consistently produces strong debt-service coverage.

Moody's also noted, of course, that "reliance on endowment exposes ACLS to fluctuations in the market."¹ I might be tempted to characterize this last assertion as a blinding glimpse of the obvious, but it is not the whole story. We are indeed exposed to the uncertainties of the financial markets, but we have been extraordinarily fortunate to be able to go to the philanthropic market to balance those fluctuations. In the past two years, the Mellon Foundation has awarded \$9 million in endowment grants to support our core administrative operations, a very real and welcome enactment of our shared values.

We're grateful for Moody's affirmation. And that's the way it usually goes in our world: values and analytical frameworks derived from business and finance measure the humanities, scholarship, and education. We get judged in their terms. From this point of view, this afternoon's question—"How the Humanities Help Us Understand Economic Behavior"—might seem impertinent to many skeptics of our work. How can the humanities have anything constructive to say about economic behavior, they might ask. There are too many fuzzy methods and arcane analyses that are applied with a misplaced sense of values and pursued with an egotistic arrogance. Is that a fair description? Well, of the behavior of the firms and funds that helped bring about the financial crisis of 2008, perhaps, but not of the humanities.

The causes and ravages of the Great Recession notwithstanding, there has been no erosion of the idea that the "business model" is somehow a wondrous prism that reveals the workings and value of almost all social institutions. It has been reigning for some time. In the 1960s, Howard Mumford Jones was chair of the ACLS Board of Directors. A few years earlier, Jones, Fred Burkhardt, and Whitney Oakes had rescued ACLS from the brink of insolvency (those darn balance sheets can be so pesky!). But not resting on the laurels of that achievement, Jones set out to convince the public that the humanities deserved national support. His book, *One Great Society: Humane Learning in the United States*, can be thought of as an effort to do for our fields what Vannevar Bush's *Science: The Endless Frontier* did for his. And to set up his argument, Jones poses "the questions business leaders would presumably want answered if they were called upon to support research" in the humanities.²

But it is worth reminding ourselves that the intellectual sovereignty of business in the academic world is a relatively new phenomenon. Universities are justly proud of their ancient lineage. We often quote Clark Kerr, who wrote that the West's most enduring institutions are the Catholic Church, the university, and the parliaments of Great Britain and Iceland. In keeping with that heritage, Harvard, although a university in the new world, designated its graduates with Latin degrees. But a rupture with the classical tradition came in 1910. As Harvard prepared to commence the first graduates of its business school, I'm told there was an alarming discovery: how would its name be translated into Latin? So the Business School's graduates received MBA degrees in English. One small step in academic credentialing, one giant shift in the social framing of academia.

The first dean of the Harvard Business School, Edwin F. Gay, later became president of the American Economic Association and also the first president of the Economic History Association. Gay lived from 1867 to 1946, and the arc of his career makes for an interesting comparison with, and contrast to, professional patterns today. After receiving a B.A. from

¹ Moody's, "Moody's Affirms A1 Rating on American Council of Learned Societies' (NY) Series 2002 Bonds; Outlook Is Stable," April 13, 2012. <http://bit.ly/PIJMIJ>.

² Howard Mumford Jones, *One Great Society: Humane Learning in the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 3.

the University of Michigan in 1890, he sought a comprehensive doctoral education in the only place where it was then to be had: German-speaking Europe. After 12 years of study in Leipzig, Göttingen, Zurich, and Berlin, he earned an economics Ph.D. from the University of Berlin in 1902. Gay was affiliated with the continental historical school of economics, which he described as a “reaction against” what he called a “tendency to abstract theorizing” of British economists.³ “[H]istorical economists refused to eliminate the ethical element” of the field, he later noted.⁴

There was a strong job market for new Ph.D.’s in 1902, and Gay became an instructor at Harvard without any need for a post-doc. He became an assistant professor in one year and a full professor in three. Among the issues he took on was one familiar to us today, but with a dated label, the subject of “tests of college efficiency,” or, in Gay’s words, “the popular guessing contest, ‘what is the matter with our colleges?’” We can agree with his response to that question. In an article published in May 1912, exactly a century ago this month, Professor Gay asserted: “[T]his whole question of what is or is not vocational in our college curriculum is often debated with too limited a vision of the demands which life makes upon a man. A sane and catholic mind, though developed by non-vocational studies, is of high practical value.”⁵

Gay frequently served in government, taking leave from Harvard during World War I to work in the new wartime agencies. After the war, he left Harvard to lead the *New York Post*, serving as the newspaper’s editor for four years. He helped found the National Bureau of Economic Research and returned to Harvard in the 1930s as professor of economic history. Upon his retirement from that university, he became director of research at the Huntington Library in California. In 1942, he spoke on “The Need for Continuing Studies in the Humanities in Wartime,” and his assertions remain valid 70 years later:

Our society, in peacetimes and even in wartimes, supports us scholars, not because we enjoy here a pleasant existence, retired from the world, not because we find research an absorbing, delightful occupation, but because our society . . . has a use and place for us. Our “academic freedom” is linked with social responsibility.

The tradition we are appointed to safeguard . . . is the continuity of the arts and sciences. . . . After we have subdued the hostile floods which menace us today, we shall be glad that we have maintained . . . the continuity of scholarship.⁶

Edwin Gay, economist and humanist, has captured, in a phrase, the aim of our business: maintaining the continuity of scholarship. Knowledge is powerful, but it is not automatically self-perpetuating. It can fray or grow stale without renewal. The ACLS “business plan” for renewing knowledge relies on two powerful engines: learned societies and the intellectual ambitions of our fellows. Let me say something about each.

³ Edwin F. Gay, “The Tasks of Economic History,” *The Journal of Economic History* 1 suppl. (Dec. 1941): 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ Edwin F. Gay, “Tests of College Efficiency,” *The School Review* 20, no. 5 (May 1912): 336.

⁶ Edwin F. Gay, “Points of View: The Need for Continuing Studies in the Humanities in Wartime,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (Nov. 1942): 2, 4.

Learned Societies

Our member societies keenly feel the spur of business culture. Many have persisted for over a century, and ACLS member societies have been remarkably durable. But past longevity is no guarantee of future market success.

Last night, one of our sessions discussed how open-access mandates would affect many society publishing programs. There's no doubt that the complex economics of scholarly communication includes many cross-subsidies. What drives much of the open access discourse is not what happens in our societies but the pricing and subscription practices of private publishers. A recent statement from the Faculty Advisory Council to the Harvard Library makes a useful distinction. It contrasts the predatory practices, on the one side, with "open access journals . . . or ones that have reasonable, sustainable subscription costs."⁷ The publications of our societies are certainly on the latter side of that divide.

Learned society membership is not simply a business proposition. As I've said many times and will do so again right now, almost all societies have voluntary membership, practice democratic governance, and are driven by shared commitment to an ideal. As the American Historical Association's executive director, Jim Grossman, puts it, the invitation to join a learned society is a "call to professional citizenship. . . . We join because we believe the benefit that accrues to all could not exist without the commitment to public culture that requires financial support." A community that does good work cannot do that work without resources."⁸

John Kutsko, the Society of Biblical Literature's executive director, has adopted the practice of cold-calling one SBL member each Friday so that he can learn their concerns. His one-man survey research may not be scientific, but it is certainly revealing. He reports some general themes that are not surprising. SBL members love what they do, are committed to teaching and research, yet often feel—perhaps especially now—that they are in a pitched battle with their campus administration. While members value attending SBL's annual meeting as a major source of identity and professional development, they worry that shrinking travel funds will impinge on their attendance. Time is everyone's scarcest resource, and multiple local commitments make it hard to volunteer for society committees or editorial boards. Many other members seek more engagement but seem stymied in their effort to network and find collaborative environments.

Within this last point is an opportunity, and several of our societies are now experimenting with new platforms, programs, and protocols for collaboration. As ACLS Vice President Steve Wheatley has noted, learned societies have been social networks since before the term was in vogue. The challenge is to see that new models of social networking reinforce the sense of solidarity a scholarly organization has traditionally supplied. Learned societies represent a vision of the academic system that is pluralistic in form but united in the ideal that, because knowledge is dynamic, research and teaching create a powerful synergy. We will strive to ensure that American learned societies, true to this vision, continue to be critical actors in the organization of knowledge.

⁷ Harvard University Faculty Advisory Council, "Major Periodical Subscriptions Cannot Be Sustained," April 17, 2012, <http://hvrld.me/HTD7aC>.

⁸ Jim Grossman, "The Incredible Rightness of Belonging: Why It Is Important to Be an AHA Member," *Perspectives Online* 50, no. 1 (Jan. 2012). <http://bit.ly/QhoHDh>.

Fellowship Programs

In dollar volume, our fellowship programs are the largest element of ACLS's business. And a peculiar business it is, for these are very long-term investments. How long? Let's do the math. ACLS supports advanced graduate students through our Dissertation Completion Fellowships and recent doctoral recipients through the New Faculty Fellows program. Today's new Ph.D. who takes up a teaching career may very likely be in the classroom for the next 40 years—that is, until 2052. In that classroom will be 18-year-old undergraduates likely to be working for at least 50 years—that is, into the twenty-second century. Our impact stretches out for a long time. And given projected returns on retirement funds and dire predictions of the solvency of social security, these calculations may be conservative if people are expected to remain at their jobs longer and longer.

We do *book* near-term returns to ACLS from the fellowships we award to scholars. Those returns are usually, in fact, actual books: the monographs, scholarly editions, and texts that derive from the work completed by fellows, often several years after their fellowship tenure. We receive articles, too, and, of course, access to the online resources developed by our Digital Innovation Fellows.

But the return on investment we seek is not a book: after all, buying books with fellowships is probably not the most cost-effective way to build a library. The aim of fellowships is investment in knowledge reaped by the fellows' research and in the fellows' future ability to create and transmit new knowledge.

* * *

What have we gained? What is the knowledge produced? Let me give you a few quick illustrations, examples that will be supplemented when we hear from the fellows themselves later this morning.

Humanities research helps us hear the many voices of a complicated world of mixed identities and allegiances that are drawn from but also reshape venerable traditions. In her ACLS-funded book *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance*, Brown University professor of music Kiri Miller studies phenomena that may at first seem trivial and ephemeral: video games and YouTube tutorials. But by bringing music theory and ethnographic methodology to bear on these practices, she places them in the longer history of musical performance and consumption. She goes on to identify a new meeting place between what she calls the “virtual and the visceral,” and demonstrates how “both digital media and embodied knowledge can bridge space and time, creating connections between dispersed and diverse individual human experiences.”

While Dr. Miller studies our present as it unfolds, Benjamin Cawthra, associate professor of history at the California State University, Fullerton, uses music to investigate the past. His dissertation-turned-monograph, *Blue Notes in Black and White*, completed with support from ACLS, focuses on a very specific set of objects: mid-century photographs of jazz musicians. Dr. Cawthra observes that “we may trace a nation's history through its art,” and that the central concern of American history is the “ongoing definition of freedom.” Questions of freedom, equality, and justice are key to understanding the motivations and actions of the musicians, photographers, and publishers and curators in his book, and a progression of case studies of photos from the 1930s through the 1960s becomes a story about race in America.

Christopher Iannini, assistant professor of literature at Rutgers University, also demonstrates that research that might seem specialized can, in fact, pursue broader truths. His ACLS-funded book, *Fatal Revolutions: Natural History, West Indian Slavery, and the Routes of American Literature*, begins with a colorful description of the fly-carrier insect, taken from an address on Caribbean flora and fauna delivered to the American Philosophical Society in 1797. He explains how this text, along with other natural histories of the West Indies, became the foundation of the American Enlightenment, as thinkers worked through new ideas about social and political identities through nature metaphors. Dr. Iannini re-centers eighteenth-century intellectual history around the Atlantic world, and in so doing, he finds new ways to think about our lives today.

But the returns from our fellowship programs are to be found in teaching as well, teaching vivified by engagement with research. For example, the ACLS Six, a group of ACLS New Faculty Fellows at Duke University, have joined together as a spontaneous collective to offer an interactive course called “Humanities on Demand,” which asks students to nominate narratives—“literary, religious, historical, musical, political, mechanical, and digital”—that have gone viral, and then subjects those narratives to analyses of structure, content, and meaning. This is part of a larger, campus-wide humanities initiative at Duke called “Humanities Writ Large,” which, like the course of the ACLS Six, experiments with new interdisciplinary, collaborative, and sometimes digitally enabled means to redefine the role of the humanities in undergraduate education. I am sure that Srinivas Aravamudan, Duke’s dean of humanities, who is here in Philadelphia, would be pleased to tell you more about this ambitious program.

Our New Faculty Fellows program was designed to help recent Ph.D.’s facing a job market severely constricted by the Great Recession. This recently concluded competition will be the last one for the NFF as such, but rest assured that we will be exploring other possibilities for post-doc programs. Aiding new doctorates to start their careers certainly helps the individual fellows themselves, but it also benefits the academy as a whole by conserving the considerable investment already made in the graduate education of the recent Ph.D.

We are all familiar with the programs that provide dedicated places for new Ph.D.’s in the humanities, many funded by the Mellon Foundation. In earlier academic generations, opportunities for post-dissertation study were pursued by young scholars who made an affirmative choice to take a year or two off from tenure-track employment to expand their portfolios. Such positions proliferated with the increase in the number of campus-based humanities centers eager to populate their new interdisciplinary programs and activities. Recent years have seen the creation of a parallel set of “ad hoc” post-docs: posts, usually involving teaching, created for a department’s promising but otherwise unemployed doctoral graduates. Whatever the vagaries of the job market, it seems safe to predict that the post-doc interval between the award of the doctorate and the start of a tenure-track job (for those fortunate enough to be offered one) will continue to grow, as will positions carrying the “post-doc” label. We hope that the effort we put in place after the New Faculty Fellows program ends will contribute to building a healthy culture of post-docs in the humanities, one where careers are advanced and not simply delayed.

Our portfolio of fellowship programs is always changing, and the Public Fellows program is a case in point. This timely effort is grounded in what we feel is an indisputable premise: that humanistic knowledge is of great value and power, and not limited to the classroom. Our first eight Public Fellows are all engaged in professional positions at govern-

ment and nonprofit agencies. The announcement of the second competition, just concluding, lists 13 agencies prepared to appoint fellows to their staffs. We expect this program to continue and are grateful for the thoughtful promotion many of our member societies have given to our announcements. I should note that Jim Grossman and Tony Grafton of the American Historical Association have been especially effective in making the case for an expanded notion of the Ph.D. career.

ACLS fellows are all over the world, and I am pleased to report on the success of two international programs. Both received financial support from the Carnegie Corporation, both have “Humanities Program” in their titles, and both aim to promote the humanities through individual fellowships and through building nascent learned societies.

The ACLS Humanities Program in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine has provided ACLS fellowships for 12 years. Advisers to that program, along with fellows, have formed an International Humanities Association—modeled loosely on the United States’ Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies—to support scholarly communication across disciplinary, institutional, and national borders in the three countries, and to serve as an institutional partner of its American model in fostering collaborations.

The African Humanities Program is a much younger initiative. It is now concluding the fourth annual competition for dissertation completion and early career fellowships, during which it awarded 160 ACLS fellowships in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. It also sponsors residential opportunities for fellows at African centers for advanced study and is beginning a publication project for the best manuscripts they produce.

The African Humanities Program seeks to ensure the continuity and enhancement of scholarship across academic generations even when universities are overworked and underfunded. Those terms, unfortunately, also apply to many institutions here, where the grinding wheel of austerity is sheering off departments and programs. A single institution may save funds in the short run, but for society as a whole this sort of deferred maintenance of its intellectual infrastructure carries high risks. Richard Brodhead, the president of Duke and co-chair of the Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, analyzes the economics of the humanities very succinctly. Our fields are, he says, “cheap to provide for, yet costly to put at risk.”⁹ Abolish the nation’s Romance language departments and we start to lose the ability to understand the Renaissance; shutter the nation’s classics departments and we won’t understand either the Renaissance or the Middle Ages. Those would be very high costs, indeed.

Let me conclude with a point about business and wealth, this one made by a former president of the American Antiquarian Society (one of the original members of ACLS), which is celebrating its bicentennial this year. The president I have in mind is Calvin Coolidge, who became the Society’s president after serving as president of the United States. We all know what he’s supposed to have said: “The business of America is business.” His actual statement, however, was a bit more nuanced: “After all, the chief business of the American people is business.” But he went on to assert, “Of course, the accumulation of wealth cannot be justified as the chief end of existence.” Indeed, in his

⁹ Richard H. Brodhead, “Advocating for the Humanities,” <http://today.duke.edu/2012/03/humanitiestalk>.

1925 speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Coolidge made one of the best possible specifications of the social role of the humanities:

We make no concealment of the fact that we want wealth, but there are many other things that we want very much more. We want peace and honor, and that charity which is so strong an element of all civilization. The chief ideal of the American people is idealism. I cannot repeat too often that America is a nation of idealists. That is the only motive to which they ever give any strong and lasting reaction.

The subjects of the humanities are the ideals, ideas, creativity, and meanings through which men and women have shaped their cultures and live their lives. Making that wealth available and accessible is our business plan, and we're sticking to it.

Thank you.