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ACLS/AAU Humanities Convocation: Reinvigorating the Humanities

Going Forward
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In looking through old ACLS reports, Barbara Henning found the following message that was read at the 1970 ACLS Annual Meeting in Washington.

Dear [ACLS President] Dr. Burkhardt:

My warm greetings to the members of the American Council of Learned Societies as you meet in the Nation's Capital.

It is with the shared conviction that every achievement in the humanities is a vital step in the national progress, that I commend your Council for its admirable record and look with confidence to your future public service.

Sincerely,
Richard Nixon.

That is a noble sentiment, concisely expressed. Let me repeat it: "every achievement in the humanities is a vital step in the national progress." We may wish to murmur in response, "Nixon, now more than ever," but I think the best response is to consider the challenges implicit in the sentiment: First, how can we bring about new achievements in the humanities. Second, do we believe we are promoting progress?

We have met here today to map the routes to further achievements by the humanities. We have had many suggestions, and the quality and quantity of ideas raised in this convocation makes summary difficult. The energy of this Convocation emphasizes the need to reflect periodically on the health and context of our enterprise.

But how should we go forward? We should take stock of what we do well and what we could do better. As my time is very limited, I will give you my quick take on those questions, expressed as four affirmations and three exhortations.

I will begin with affirmations – What the humanities does well and needs support to do more of.

First affirmation: The humanities excel at the creation of knowledge.

The humanities may need – do need – structural organization and financial reinvigoration, but we have intellectual vigor aplenty. The research enterprise, if ACLS fellowship competitions are an index, is extremely productive. The humanities create knowledge, as well as methods for creating and

organizing new knowledge and increase our knowledge of knowledge itself. All of this knowledge – scientific, social scientific, and humanistic – is ultimately interconnected and mutually dependent.

Second affirmation: The humanities excel at asking questions.

They file the brief for ambiguity. We do interpretation and critical inquiry well – not everything is positivistic knowledge, not everything (even this talk) is the affirmation of received wisdom. As Luke Menand has put it: “[t]he academic’s job in a free society is to serve the public culture by asking the questions the public does not want to ask, by investigating the subjects it cannot or will not investigate, by accommodating the voices it fails or refuses to accommodate.”¹

Practical implications of the first two affirmations: We need more support for research (duh!) without it, we stultify. We need more flexible support for research: short-term grants, collaborative grants, grants for travel to conferences and collections. Speaking of collections, we need to finance adequately the infrastructure of humanities research: libraries and museums, and to continue to collect and to digitize (as Paul Courant noted).

Third affirmation: We do education well.

The value of a humanities education in preparing students for productive and fulfilling lives is incontestable. As an educational paradigm, it is important to affirm the centrality of the humanities within all the liberal arts, and their connections to our partners in the sciences and social sciences.

Practical implication of affirmation three: We need to pay attention to the erosion of liberal arts in many institutions. Similarly, we must attend to the erosion of the teacher/scholar model of the professoriate and of the tenured teaching force. That is an ominous trend, well documented and analyzed in the new book, *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers*, by Jack H. Schuster and Martin Finkelstein.

Fourth affirmation: One cannot understand or engage “globalization” without the knowledge and interpretations offered by the humanities.

The humanities provide the means for understanding and appreciating other cultures through the study of language, the arts, religion, philosophy, history and social life of peoples who exist not in an imagined isolation but in actual conditions of extensive interaction and mutual change. They help make sense of a world where cultures, economies, and value systems brush up with increasing frequency and speed against each other and are transformed in the process.

Practical implication of affirmation four: We need to build and support more genuinely international and transnational structures of knowledge creation, reducing impediments to the free flow of students and faculty (visas) and keeping the boundaries between nations as low as we can.

Now, three exhortations concerning what I think we can do better.

Exhortation One: Collaboration

The solo researcher is still the reigning model in the humanities, even though we know that collaborative work in the social sciences has proven very efficient at adding intellectual and educational “oomph” to the research enterprise. In those fields, interdisciplinarity is often a collective enterprise; in ours, individuals carry the burden of interdisciplinarity.

¹ Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas*, ACLS Occasional Paper No. 49 (New York: 2001) 21.

I make this exhortation while acknowledging that many durable and important humanities practices – including our own ACLS fellowship programs – reinforce the reigning solo model of scholarship. My list of practical responses to this challenge includes more support for humanities centers and humanities labs that foster collaboration and bridge the interstices among units, as mentioned by David Marshall. We need to explore more flexible funding models that support collaboration internally as well as externally, and work to make boundaries among disciplines more permeable.

Exhortation Two: We need more numbers of two kinds

a) Data about ourselves, we need the “Indicators” that Norman Bradburn spoke of and that will tell us who, where and how we are.

b) Digits, i.e., we need to support digitization more systematically, and not as an incidental special project. We are doing the digital humanities well, but we can do it more intensively and affirmatively. Doing so will help advance collaboration and, we can hope, communication with a wider audience.

The online world should not be just the stage for the presentation of humanistic knowledge, but must be itself the object of humanistic study. If the humanities are about reading, writing, seeing, listening, and knowing, the digital realm is changing how we do each of these, and it will only grow as the means and site of human creativity and cultural expression. If we are to understand the online world as well as we understand the ancient world, humanities scholars will need the tools and capacities for the digital environment.

Exhortation Three: We need to communicate better – across the humanities, across the campus, with the wider publics upon whom our support ultimately depends, a point made so eloquently today by Tom Mallon, Nicola Courtright, and Beth Wenger.

a) Among ourselves – practical implication; we need to accept new modes of scholarly communication beyond just books and articles.

b) Across campus – here humanities centers play an important role as well as initiatives such as Cornell’s humanities news service.

c) With the wider public(s) – speaking at the 1997 ACLS Annual Meeting, New York University historian Thomas Bender well expressed the case for a more public humanities:

To the extent that we follow a pattern of withdrawal from the public culture, we become vulnerable to those simple questions that often enrage us: What do you do? What good is it? We err if we respond that ‘it’s none of your business’ or that ‘you would not understand,’ which amounts to the same thing. These are fair questions, and if we cannot answer them for our neighbors in everyday language, we should be concerned.²

Fortunately, we do not lack for models of effective and high-minded public communication. The annual Chicago Humanities Festival or the University of Iowa’s Year of the Humanities comes to mind. Our learned societies have syndicated radio programs (the Modern Language Association),

² Thomas Bender, “Locality and Worldliness,” in *The Transformation of Humanistic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: Opportunities and Perils*, ACLS Occasional Paper No. 40 (New York: 1997) 8.

public interest magazines (the Archaeological Institute of America), speakers bureaus (the Organization of American Historians), and resources for journalists (the American Academy of Religion). The work of the Federation of State Humanities Councils and of Imagining America is especially noteworthy.

If we are to communicate more effectively, without doing violence to our distinctiveness, we need clear statements of our purpose. What would they be? Here are points I hope would be included:

We may live in the “information age” and earn our livelihoods in a “knowledge economy,” but human beings define themselves through values and make the leap from mere existence to a fuller life by means of imagination and feeling. It is through humanistic scholarship that we can grasp and test the values that have sustained and explained the human condition in societies past and present. Humanities concerns values, even if we neither prescribe nor proscribe them. As Robert Scholes noted in his 2004 Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association, “We cannot make ourselves or anyone else virtuous, but we can illuminate the question of what virtue is.”³ Indeed, we should prize and model the civil and searching contestation of values: doing so is a contribution to our national progress as a democracy.

If you can stand to read the newspaper, you know that incoherence, tumult, and conflict in religion, culture, ethics and aesthetics, real crises of meaning and value, are rather the order of the day. The humanities bring focus, reflection, interpretation and learning to that confusion. The humanities provide the perceptual and imaginative skills that make those past achievements and the creativity of today meaningful. And we do so today without asserting an opposition to science, or relying on an unproblematized notion of value, or retreating into a self-enclosed world of academic speculation.

Let me conclude with one more quote, this one from William James, whose works and letters have been edited, a 32-year project sponsored by the ACLS. For me, it describes what the individual and the world needs and what the humanities provides. James writes:

. . . I tried to make you feel how soaked and shot through life is with values and meanings which we fail to realize because of our external and insensible point of view. . . There lies more than a mere interest of curious speculation in understanding this. . . It is the basis of all our tolerance, social, religious, and political. The forgetting of it lies at the root of every stupid and sanguinary mistake that rulers over subject-peoples make. . . No one has insight into all the ideals. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep.⁴

To return to Nixon’s assertion, with which I opened – to refuse the dogmatic and strike at the root of injustice and cruelty would indeed be progress. We must continue to foster the free rein of the imagination, to defend the free exchange of ideas, and to resist all rigidities of ideology and institutional structures. Insisting on the value of what the humanities can offer is what we owe ourselves and, as Congressmen Leach and Price as pointedly reminded us, our publics as well.

³ Robert Scholes, “Presidential Address 2004: The Humanities in a Posthumanist World,” *PMLA* 120:3 (2005): 731.

⁴ William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* (Harvard UP: Cambridge, 1983) 150.