The Future of the Humanities in the Twenty First Century

A Report to the President and Congress of the United States of America

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Dear Friend,

In 1994, President Clinton appointed me as chairman of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. This was a proud moment for me, and an opportunity to “articulate the fundamental and intrinsic values of the arts and the humanities” to American life – an opportunity of which I took full advantage.

Through the work of the John Brademas Center, specifically as a result of our project on the humanities and our on-going international work in cultural diplomacy, we have gained a clearer picture of the impact the humanities can have on the cultural vitality of a democratic society. Our citizens produce, share and explore an astonishing array of arts and humanistic scholarship. These cultural achievements are emulated and celebrated throughout the world. It is our belief that the humanities are, despite today’s economic and societal uncertainties, that which brings us together and connects us all. Given this singular power of the humanities, we urge governments, universities and citizens to join together to renew and reenergize their commitment to the humanities for the benefit of us all.

In 1997, the President’s Committee released a benchmark report, which provided the President a comprehensive evaluation of cultural life in America. Included, were over 50 detailed suggestions that would help strengthen public and private support of both the arts and humanities in our country. I invite you to revisit our Creative America report, as much, unfortunately, is still applicable today.

NYU’s President John Sexton recently spoke of the nation’s current “allergy to thought, to complexity and nuance - a kind of collapse into an intellectual relativism where opinions become fact.” He further observed that the decline of a liberal arts education and “a growing hostility to knowledge in this country” is a “dangerous thing.”

It is our belief that Congress, but most especially college and university administrators have a major role to play in helping to stem the tide of humanistic devaluation. In the courses that the humanities offer, students and citizens plumb the depths of human existence and history. Such courses foster self-awareness, knowledge and critical inquiry – our best correctives against greed, discord and political posturing. The humanities are not just enhancements; they are essentials to the good of our democracy.

I hope you find this report on the humanities helpful and invigorating... let us rediscover what it is to be human.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
INTRODUCTION

Modern technology and globalization have dramatically affected the character of knowledge from the diversity of its points of inquiry and generation to its increasingly rapid and fluid dissemination. The humanities\(^1\) have been particularly impacted by the information age, resulting in a major shift in government research priorities and levels of philanthropic support for their propagation. At the same time, a majority of students enter college with the expectation that their increasingly costly education will provide them with marketable majors, a trend that has resulted in a widely discussed restructuring of American post-secondary education. Throughout the country, colleges and universities appear to be expanding faculty, funding and student recruitment in the STEM disciplines (sciences, technology, engineering and math) as well as business and professional programs, while cutting back resources in the humanities.\(^2\)

This widespread decline of humanities programming, course offerings and majors in the liberal arts is, we believe, compelling reason for national concern. Confronted with a political and social climate that increasingly views humanities disciplines as irrelevant, even non-essential, to America’s economic and cultural vitality, many practitioners and academics believe that the humanities are facing a major challenge in the 21st century to justify their worth.\(^3\) Concern for what would appear to be a dramatic retreat from the long tradition of American liberal arts education, and government support for the arts and culture generally, inspired New York University’s John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress to convene a symposium on the future prospects for the humanities in higher education in the technological and globalized age.

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1. As laid out in the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965: “The term ‘Humanities’ includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism, and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.”


3. According to the *Humanities Indicators Prototype*, the humanities’ share of post secondary degrees is less than half of what it was during the middle of the 20th century. Humanities and liberal arts majors account for about 8 percent (110,000 students), compared with 17.8 percent of students in the 1960s; of the current 8 percent, the majority of students graduate from elite private schools. In a December 2008 survey of survey of 200 higher education institutions by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and Moody’s *Investors Services* finding that 10 percent of the surveyed institutions have imposed a total hiring freeze in the humanities, and an additional 43 percent have imposed a partial freeze.
Held in November of 2011 at New York University’s La Pietra campus in Florence, Italy, the symposium brought together a diverse group of humanities scholars, representatives of civil society organizations, secondary and post-secondary educators and administrators, elected officials and policy makers to discuss and analyze the arguments for and against the centrality of the American humanities and liberal arts tradition.

The symposium examined the relationship between the humanities enterprise and the market, pop culture, and government. Participants generally agreed that the humanities work towards educating the whole person. In the humanities, there are lifelong opportunities for intellectual and cultural enrichment, and for engendering the civic virtues, humanistic disposition, and analytical and critical thinking skills that have proven essential for democratic society and global citizenship. The participants also found immense variety in the content, effectiveness and utility for students majoring in the humanities and liberal arts, which evidence the value of the humanities even in the technological and globalized age. In a time when much emphasis is being placed on STEM disciplines in university learning, it is important to note that the humanities complement, not distract from, fields of study in the categories of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.
A CALL FOR CONGRESSIONAL ACTION

The current tumultuous economic, political, and social climate makes the practical and monetary significance of the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) more readily apparent, often, many believe, at the expense of the humanities. Indicated below are ways in which the marginalization of the humanities has been found to negatively impact culture and society:

1) Diminishes the centrality of certain heritages and traditions calling into question some of the values and ideals upon which American culture and liberal arts education were founded. In a constantly changing America, there must be a strong humanistic environment for the sharing of ideas and principles.

2) Promotes the creation of a small, elite class of technically educated citizens with access to the lion share of economic and political power, a dangerous precedent that could pre-determine socio-economic status and increase monetization of the public policy agenda.

3) Deter promotion of the common good and thwart development of empathy, charity, and tolerance in a nation’s character.

Because the decline and devaluation of the humanities has by this time in our Nation’s history become sufficiently critical, the participants urged immediate consideration by federal, state and local government. While it was agreed that the academy has an obligation to play a leadership role in explaining and reaffirming the centrality of the humanities to American higher education, participants also believe that government has a self-affirming obligation to help civil and educational institutions to preserve and impart knowledge about the nation’s historical, philosophical and literary underpinnings.4

4 In partial response to the ascending unpopularity of humanities programming, the unegalitarian structure of post-secondary school education, as well as the gradual attrition of college graduates conversant in American history and philosophy, members of the United States Congress found and declared that the humanities must “belong to all people of the United States,” and that their preservation is an “appropriate matter” of concern to the federal government. Scholarship must not be limited to science and technology alone and the government must give “full value and support” to the humanities. The humanities are those courses that help “achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.” For this reason, Congress concluded, the Federal Government must “compliment, assist, and add programs” for the advancement of the humanities and liberal arts (cf. United States Code, Title 20, Chapter 26, Subchapter I, Section 951).
RESOLUTIONS

After careful deliberation, the participants agreed on the following resolutions toward the goal of promoting respect and support necessary for the humanities to survive and flourish in 21st century higher education. These Resolutions emerge from a careful review by the participants of the current conditions, future outlooks, and an examination of the purpose the humanities serve in American education and culture. The John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress at New York University respectfully submits these resolutions for consideration by the President of the United States, Members of Congress and University Administrators:

Resolved

1) To incentivize secondary schools, community and 4-year colleges and universities to have as part of their graduation goals coursework in the humanities.

2) To offer humanities courses in the canon of Western history, new and emerging American scholarship and take scholarly consideration of non-Western ethical, philosophical, religious and historical traditions.

3) To formulate and implement federal and state policies intended to reinforce the role of the humanities in K-12 education as a means to help increase the rigor of the entire curriculum, strengthen teacher quality, and improve low-performing schools.

4) To promote government and philanthropic support for research into the current state of humanities education, the range and extent of public humanities programs, and the impact of the humanities and liberal arts on professional advancement.

5) To strengthen federal and state education policies for humanities education through teacher training, particularly in collaboration with the Department of Education, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, Institute of Museums and Library Services, state arts and humanities programs, and other relevant government agencies; university and cultural organizations; and working professionals dedicated to humanities education.

6) To encourage the NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] and state humanities councils, private and community foundations, publishers, filmmakers, visual artists and technology companies to develop public-private partnerships to promote the increased digitalization of cultural and humanistic publications, research collections, and archives.

7) To require federal agencies to expand opportunities for international cultural and educational exchanges that enhance knowledge of other cultures, particularly by way of cultural diplomatic efforts and research.
RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY MAKERS, EDUCATORS AND ADMINISTRATORS

CHALLENGES

Despite the demonstrated benefits of the humanities for individuals and society at large, participants in the symposium recognized their responsibility for some of the deficiencies that have befallen the educational and cultural support system – private and public – for their disciplines. It was agreed that as a group, humanists could be faulted for falling short in telling university and foundation leaders, political leaders, and the public the story of the humanities and their vital importance to civic life in a global 21st century.

Secondary school educators are increasingly challenged to reevaluate and enrich their curriculum for academic rigor in the humanities in light of the pressing need to help fashion educated, creative, imaginative, and innovative citizens whether on their way to college or not.

Rising tuition costs and mounting student loan debt are in danger of diminishing socio-economic diversity and distorting the American humanities tradition critical to basic reading, writing and critical thinking competencies.5

At the federal level, members observed, departments and agencies make 95% of their grants in STEM fields: [The] Federal funding... allocation for the humanities has diminished drastically; in 1979, the dollar value of NSF [National Science Foundation] grants was five times greater than grants from the NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities]. By 1997, NSF grants were 33 times larger than NEH grants. 6

It comes as no surprise, then, that colleges and universities have an economic incentive to invest in STEM programming. Research in scientific disciplines is highly profitable, especially when factoring in the overhead the university is allowed and practical applications of research often with patent implications.

Finally, public and private universities have been cutting tenure track positions disproportionately in the humanities.7 At the same time, salaries for positions in the humanities continue to lag those in other fields. Without a strong and growing humanities work force there will be even less future for American liberal arts higher education.

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5 Cf. Richard Arum and Josipa Roska’s recent findings in Academically Adrift (Chicago, 2011).
6 According to the NSF’s 2005 annual Survey of Research and Development Expenditures at Universities and Colleges, total spending for science and engineering research was almost 46 billion, over 46 times humanities research and development expenditures.
7 Mary Ann Mason, The Future of the Ph. D.: The Chronicle of Higher Education (May 3, 2012): Over the past 30 years, universities have relentlessly reduced the centrality of tenure in higher education. Full-timers who were either tenured or on the tenure track made up 55 percent of the teaching faculty in 1970, 1975, and 1980. Since then, various federal data sets document the steady growth of adjunct positions and the decline of tenure-track jobs in the academic work force. By 2007, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, tenured and tenure-track academics constituted only 31 percent of the teaching faculty while 49 percent worked part time and 12 percent were non-tenure-track full-timers.
ACTION ITEMS FOR IMPLEMENTING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Build collaborations.** Leaders of professional associations, businesses, and business-education partnerships should work with federal, state and local agencies to forge connections among different educators in the humanities. Collaborations among national leadership organizations and university administrations should address the pressing equitable access, and infuse more schools with literature, philosophy and the classics.

2. **Develop the “Ecology of the Humanities.”** Develop a better understanding of “where” the humanities are required. Strengthen teacher development by locating humanities initiatives beyond university programming and setting up a mechanism for sharing and ideas about humanities integration through communities of practice. Key to this process is identifying the roles for regional and state humanities and education agencies, as well as for private funders.

3. **Expand in-school opportunities.** Humanists represent a constitutive component of a well functioning civil society. Colleges and universities should look at expanding the role of humanities professors in order to partner with local institutions and partnerships. This is also to suggest a greater and more robust course offering in the humanities (especially in public colleges and universities) precisely to indicate the leadership opportunities available in the job market for humanities majors.

4. **Utilize federal and state policies to reinforce the humanities in K-12 education.** The humanities disciplines should focus on the need for federal and state education leaders to provide policy guidance for employing the humanities with the goal of increasing the rigor of curriculum, strengthening teacher quality, and improving low-performing schools. Federal and state governments are urged to encourage the inclusion of the humanities as essential to a comprehensive education.

5. **Widen the focus of evidence gathering about the benefits of humanities education.** Expand systematic data gathering about the humanities, specifically about the humanities’ role in developing creativity and enhancing engagement in school and in the workforce. From a government perspective, policymakers are urged to help stakeholders make informed arguments and decisions regarding the impact and equitable access to the humanities.
VALUE OF THE HUMANITIES

The humanities help shape society’s driving engines, i.e., creativity, diversity and imagination, while giving meaning to the fundamental questions of human existence. Participation in the humanities unlocks the human potential and lifts us beyond isolated individualism to shared understanding.

Relational in nature, the humanities offer perspective, orient a person in the world, and help individuals and communities impart meaning to and negotiate the web of human relationships. History, literature, ethics, and philosophy offer lessons on the human condition that connect individuals to the community and overcome social fragmentation. They enable prudent and informed judgments. The humanities instill in a person the confidence and capability to criticize tradition.

Through the study of the heterogeneity of opinion, the humanities engage the citizen, allowing her or him to experience an environment of both agreement and disagreement. The humanities foster a habit of willingness to listen to debate on all sides of an issue, enabling citizens to live in communities of assent and dissent. The traditions of deliberation and reasonable disagreement serve the best interests of democracy and the rule of law.

The humanities bequeath citizens the intellectual furnishings and moral imagination to make informed judgments, including about the values, character and arguments of those who present themselves for public office.

Like the arts, the humanities can serve as a transcultural bridge, forging the way for social and commercial exchanges across the 21st century’s increasingly porous borders geographically and technologically. The study of foreign languages and literature provide a window onto other peoples, overcoming barriers to understanding a culture different from one’s own, a skill especially necessary for today's multicultural world.8

To that end, humanistic education would serve immeasurable value as an integrated part of the planning strategies of US policymakers as a key element of diplomacy. International exchanges of ideas, literature and philosophy are based on the framework of the shared body of congruent knowledge and literature of not only Western history but other related and parallel humanistic movements of other cultures of the world. Without the humanities (Western and non-Western alike) our ability to make or demand from others logical, informed, respectful, tolerant, and critical decisions about managing a democratic republic, “free market,” and/or world order, is arguably made more difficult, if not impossible

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8 Carol Geary Schneider, *A Dangerous Assault*, Inside Higher Education (February 8, 2013): How can we possibly imagine that the U.S. can continue to lead in a globally interdependent world when most Americans already know far too little about global histories, cultures, religions, values, or social and political systems — the very subjects that humanities and social sciences scholarship can help us explore?
CONCLUSION

The understanding of cultural and social mores, various ways of being and thought, as well as the tracking of religious and moral beliefs within and across boundaries, are requisite to ground all modern and global discussions and discoveries.

The restoration of the humanities in university and public life would restore respected balance to the nation as a whole both home and abroad. Teachers, practitioners, advocates and students of the humanities must find ways to restore faith and defend their concentration in ways that define their importance. The suggestions outlined in this report illustrate a course of action that can help bridge the disconnect causing a dangerous contradiction to university learning and intellectual development in the western tradition. In the twenty first century, STEM education has proven its importance to the advancement of society, thus rightfully establishing a place in the modern university system. The humanities, therefore, are ideal in helping to develop students choosing STEM fields to increase their sense of creative expression and human understanding.

It is evident throughout history that the relationship between the hard sciences and the humanities is one of discovery and motivation. It must be understood that both are essential to the success of the human race. This report profiles the importance of this relationship and calls for a reinvestment in the future the study of the human condition and how it can benefit future generations.
AUTHORED AND EDITED

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**Henry Mack**, Honors College Fellow and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, Florida International University. Contact: maklaki@fiu.edu, (305)348-2185

**Michael DiNiscia**, Associate Director, John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress, New York University. Contact: Michael.DiNiscia@nyu.edu, (212)998-3633

**Thomas M. McIntyre**, Assistant Director, John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress, New York University. Contact: Tom.McIntyre@nyu.edu, (202)654-8327

**Ruth Ann Stewart**, Clinical Professor of Public Policy, New York University, Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Contact: Ruth.Ann.Stewart@nyu.edu, (212)998-7417

**Alberta Arthurs**, Former Director for Arts and Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation. Contact: aba@arthurs.us

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Brigette Lopez
Jonathan Hunter
Carson Scott
Kristina Lewis
Abdul Haq Bin Shamsul Kamar
Caitlin Ryan
Taylor McGuire
Carlos Estevez
Sara Bowers

ONLINE

http://www.nyu.edu/brademas/humanities/
SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS

• John Agresto - Visiting Fellow at James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions
• Alberta Arthurs - Former Director for Arts and Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation
• Steve Balch - Chairman of the National Association of Scholars
• Jonathan Bate - Fellow of both the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature
• Robert Berdahl - Former President for the Association of American Universities
• MaryKatherine Callaway - President of the Association of American University Presses
• Bruce Cole - Senior Scholar at the Hudson Institute
• Mickey Edwards - Director of the Aspen Institute-Rodel Fellowships in Public Leadership
• Harriet Fulbright - President of the J. William & Harriet Fulbright Center
• Geoffrey Harpham - President and Director of the National Humanities Center
• Frank Hodsoll - Former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts
• Anthony Kronman - Sterling Professor at Yale Law School and Global Professor at NYU-AD
• Julie Margetta Morgan - Policy Analyst at the Center for American Progress
• Sara Ogger - Executive Director of The New York Council for the Humanities
• The Honorable Tom Petri (R, WI-6) - Co-Chair Congressional Humanities Caucus
• Ken Rogerson - Assistant Director of the Liberal Studies Program at FIU
• Elizabeth Sherman - Professor in the Department of Government at American University
• Sheila Slaughter - Louise McBee Professor of Higher Education at University of Georgia
• Diana Sorensen - Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University
• John Stack - Professor of Politics and Law at Florida International University
• Ruth Ann Stewart - Clinical Professor of Public Policy at NYU Wagner
• Jean Strouse - Director of Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, NYPL
• Christopher Tollefsen - Professor of Philosophy at University of South Carolina
• Gaye Tuchman - Professor of Sociology at University of Connecticut
• Jane Tylus - Director of The Humanities Initiative at NYU
• Bradford P. Wilson - Executive Director of the James Madison Program
• Jamil Zainaldin - President of the Georgia Humanities Council