The Humanities, without Apology

Dr. Pauline Yu, President of the American Council of Learned Societies

I’m honored to be here, and I think that the issues that are framing this whole series—what the university today is facing—could not be more timely or of greater consequence to address.

My opening remarks are fairly brief. They fill the span of a TED talk. I don’t know how many of you are familiar with the genre. If you’ve been to YouTube you may have seen one of them. The acronym derives from its origin in conferences devoted to Technology, Entertainment and Design, where short, fast-paced inspirational talks seek to convey new ideas riding the crest of waves transforming not just communication, but social life in general. The brevity and seeming informality of these talks, though they’re in fact quite well rehearsed, are meant to signal a departure from the decades, if not centuries, of boredom emanating from a podium.

Now a century ago, there weren’t any TED talks, but there was a Teddy talk that you may
have heard of in the tumultuous election of 1912, when former President Teddy Roosevelt was running as a third-party candidate. He was preparing to speak in Milwaukee, Wisconsin when he was shot by an aspiring assassin. Roosevelt was injured. The bullet penetrated into his chest, but it lacked the force to pierce any vital organ. So he proceeded to deliver his speech, bleeding dramatically but declaring that he was fit as a bull moose, thus giving a name to his progressive party.

What saved Teddy? It turns out the assassin's bullet had been slowed by passing through his eyeglass case and—this is critical—the 50-page text of the talk that he was going to be delivering that was in his suit pocket. Had he planned a TED talk, he would have perished even before his ten minutes ran out. Well, I feel fairly safe in this crowd. It's a good thing because I don't have a pocket to put my eyeglasses in and I only have a few pages of a short talk to protect me.

I do continue to be mindful of history, and this is 2012, when we have celebrated at least two notable sesquicentennials that I think are worth keeping in mind.

First, of course, is the issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation just a week or so and 150 years ago, which marked the beginning of the death of slavery in the United States.

And the second, which is probably even more pertinent to our general topic, was that even as slavery began to die, the national constellation of land grant universities was born. That same year on July 2, 1862, President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, which provided public lands to the several states on the condition that proceeds of the sale of those lands be devoted to establishing public colleges and universities for “the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits of and professions in life.”

So we thus have from the 37th Congress, meeting 150 years ago, the affirmation that higher education is a public good, that it is not mere workforce preparation but education for life, and that such an education should include what we now call the humanities.

I’m going to repeat that with my own emphasis: “A liberal and practical education.” Now, to be sure, the Act specified that the new institutions would give scope to the agricultural and mechanical arts, but it required also that this emphasis not exclude the classics and other fields.

Sadly, many of today’s policymakers in the 112th Congress and elsewhere seem determined instead to celebrate that anniversary by further reducing public support for colleges and universities and promoting the growth of for-profit institutions. I think it’s therefore incumbent on all of us who
prize and pursue humanities scholarship to make the case for its enduring value.

Advocates for the humanities have often been too shy in making that case. In the early 20th century, one foundation program officer observed that, “[w]ith the quick march of science, philosophy and humanism have gone under a cloud. When they assert themselves, they are prone to do so apologetically, on the ground that they, too, are or can be scientific.” Much of the subsequent discourse about the humanities, by humanists themselves, has been consumed by a tone of self-defense, hand-wringing, crisis-mongering and invidious comparison to other fields. I think we should not apologize and we should not self-marginalize.

"We can and must state clearly and concisely that the humanities are an essential element of our academic and cultural infrastructure. They have always been integral to the university’s role as a knowledge-bearing institution, as an incubator of innovation, and as an essential repository of intellectual freedom."

Scholarship in the humanities is extraordinarily vibrant. How do I know? The evidence cascades into the ACLS offices or, more precisely, into our computer servers every year. Our annual competitions for fellowships and grants receive more than 3,000 applications and 11,000 letters of reference for the more than 350 awards that we make, carrying a total of $15 million. Our intensive peer review process mobilizes the essentially voluntary contributions of nearly 700 scholars, and if some of you are here today, I thank you on behalf of everybody.

I serve as a reviewer myself in two of the competitions and can confirm that this is hard work indeed, but work that leaves absolutely no doubt about the quality of humanities scholarship today. The importance of the questions posed in proposals, the acuity of the arguments made, the impressive range of the evidence already marshaled, and the expressiveness with which conclusions are presented all provide stunning evidence of the cumulative progress of humanities scholarship. At one recent ACLS board meeting, a member who won an ACLS grant in the 1970s and also served as a reviewer in a recent competition commented, both happily and a bit ruefully, that his proposal wouldn’t stand a chance of being approved today.

I’m pleased to note that applicants from UC Davis have been conspicuously successful in ACLS competitions. If you’re sending a proposal in from Davis, you have a one out of eight chance of receiving an award from ACLS, while the average national success rate has been one out of 15 or 16. I don’t know what the magic potion here is, but it’s working. Faculty and students here have been awarded over $1.7 million from ACLS, and 80% has come since the year 2000, which is another interesting fact. UC Davis fellows have been especially prominent among winners of prized Burkhardt and Ryskamp Fellowships, which are awarded in very stringent competitions among younger scholars. Their achievements help us make the case for the vitality of the humanities.

If we are to give the infrastructure of intellectual innovation in the humanities both the attention and resources it requires, I think there are several points that we must drive home, and I will just make five today.
First, it cannot be asserted strongly enough that the humanities are research fields. They’re not simply a compendium of received wisdom or refined taste acquired through extended connoisseurship. This simple proposition is obvious to many in this room, but it is easily submerged because the practice of humanities research is often individualistic, and it is also likely presented in a form that does not explicitly recapitulate the process of discovery and research, as is a standard practice in the natural and social sciences. But everything we value about the humanities—the knowledge they convey, the insights they provoke, the understandings they sustain—derives ultimately from the hard work of skilled and dedicated researchers.

As the historian Anthony Grafton of Princeton has pointed out, the rigorous methods and standards of the humanities give them a critical role in “preserving the cultural heritage of the nation and world: preserving languages; preserving skill in the authentication and interpretation of works of art; preserving long-form, demanding, expository writing. Of course, all of these areas also produce innovations: new pedagogies for classical languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Greek and Latin, for example, as well as for the whole range of modern languages. But there are central humanistic skills largely traditional in nature, such as the editing and interpretation of difficult texts in little-known languages, which American universities have fostered and preserved.”

My second point is a corollary to the first: humanities research constantly renews itself, asking questions again that were thought to have been answered definitively and transforming how we see the world around us. That transformation is consequential.

I’ll just give you one sesquicentennial example, since we’re on the theme of birthdays. In the past 50 years, the burgeoning of scholarship on race in American has revised significantly how we understand the Civil War. As Harvard President Drew Faust pointed out in her recent Jefferson lecture, commemorations of the war’s centennial in the 1960s looked back to a “War Between the States,” which was portrayed primarily as a clash of industrial and agricultural civilizations. Today we understand that racial slavery was the root cause of the “irrepressible conflict” and that African Americans were critical agents of their own emancipation.

Research tests old ideas and creates new ones. Without the renewal provided by research, the public humanities and the humanities in the curriculum would quickly wither away. And I don’t need to tell you that a distinctive feature of humanities research, and almost all new knowledge produced by it, is that it’s largely a public good, yielding little commercial gain to its creators. While the printed or digital presentation of new knowledge can be copyrighted, the knowledge itself cannot be patented or sold. Any investor in humanities research is investing on behalf of the public.

Point three: humanities research catalyzes teaching. Just as students who directly engage with faculty have better educational outcomes, faculty who directly engage with what they teach provide a better education. Over the past 150 years, American higher education has grown in scope and expanded in power because individual faculty in the system assumed the dual role of scholar and teacher. Scholar-teachers whose intellectual horizons are broadened by research are best able to educate students in the liberal arts, expanding their intellectual horizons and instilling in them the same habits of life-long critical inquiry that they practice themselves.
I think one of the best examples of this power is recounted by Andrew Delbanco in his recent book, College: What it Was, Is and Should Be, in an anecdote which involves the Columbia art historian Meyer Schapiro. Evidently, when Professor Schapiro lectured on the French painter Cézanne in his classes, students are supposed to have said, “Whatever he's smoking, I'll have some.”

Point four: the humanities undergird democracy. Louis Menand, a professor of English at Harvard and staff writer at The New Yorker, maintains that “[t]he academic’s job in a free society is to serve the public culture by asking the public 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. Academics need to look to the world to see what kind of teaching and thinking needs to be done and how they might better organize themselves to do it, but they need to ignore the world’s insistence that they reproduce its self-image.” The questions Menand refers to are, I would argue, precisely those posed by the humanities. Democracy is grounded in the ability to ask them, and to be able to evaluate critically the answers to them, and to be able to tell the difference between an argument supported by evidence and mere opinion.

My fifth point has to do with the crucial role that the humanities provide in helping us to understand the world we inhabit.

“It is the humanist’s insistence on local knowledge, on regional knowledge, that can help us to focus and clarify the vision of an otherwise quite monocular globalizing lens.”

Since the tragedies of September 11th, we’ve frequently heard the phrase “now more than ever” used to advocate the need, for example, for sustained study of critical languages and cultures other than our own. But I think the imperative has always been there to do so, as well as our central role in the humanities to fulfill it.

I’ve often quoted the sociologist Nancy Ruther, who said that “higher education is an aquifer, not a spigot.” Colleges and universities, she argues, “cannot be built in response to immediate needs, as the spigot someone can turn on for the expertise they need at the moment, …[but] should be conceived as a deep reserve, built up slowly and sustained over the long term, on the assumption that though specific needs will arise, they cannot be anticipated.” Global education takes time and commitment. “Deep knowledge of particular parts of the world cannot be produced overnight,” as Mary Louise Pratt, the former president of the Modern Language Association, has written. “It has to be built up over years, supported through real relationships with people and institutions abroad, passed along, invested in and valued independent of the contingencies, fears and passions of a moment.” And that is why no understanding of a globalizing world can be achieved without a sustained commitment to humanistic study.

ACLS has documented the changes in the landscape of the humanities over the last 30 years through the Charles Homer Haskins prize lectures delivered at our annual meeting each spring, and if you aren’t familiar with them, I urge you to take a look at them. They’re all available on our website at ACLS.org and they really do give you a good sense of who the real
stars in the humanities have been for the past three decades. Every year, delegates from our learned societies select a distinguished senior scholar to deliver the lecture, asking him or her “to reflect on a lifetime of work as a scholar on the motives, the chance determinations, the satisfactions (and the dissatisfactions) of the life of learning; and to explore through one’s own life the larger institutional life of scholarship.” The resulting intellectual autobiographies, and one lecturer referred to his rather wryly as an “auto-obituary,” collectively limn the changing intellectual landscape of the humanities, both its slow evolutions and its sometimes tectonic shifts.

In what brief time remains, I can only cite one example, but I think it’s a telling one, that of Clifford Geertz, who died in 2006 and was perhaps the best known and widest read anthropologist of his generation. In his Haskins lecture of 1999, he recounts how he came to rework the very concept of culture itself. When Geertz began his fieldwork in Indonesia, anthropologists saw culture as a “diffuse and all-embracing… all-seasons explanation for anything human beings might contrive to do, imagine, say, be or believe.” It was a “super organic” force that shapes our lives “as a cake-mold shapes a cake or gravity our movements.”

But, as Geertz participated in the life of a Balinese village during his dissertation fieldwork, he found that this rigid free-floating concept could not help him in understanding his new neighbors or “discovering who they think they are, what they think they’re doing, or to what end they think they are doing it.” To achieve that insight it was necessary, he concluded, to “gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which people enact their lives,” using conceptual tools drawn from “philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, history, psychology, sociology, and the cognitive sciences, as well as to some degree in biology and literature.” This focus on meaning and meaning-making helped him see his neighbors as active agents in creating their own life experiences, not as automatons playing out a predetermined script. Geertz’s powerful new conceptualization not only moved symbolic anthropology to the center of intellectual life, but also highlights the central object of all the humanities: understanding how humans create and express meaning.

Today, as we consider the issues facing the American university, I think it’s worth viewing our situation from a global perspective. Indeed, the rest of the world has recognized the manifest strengths of American higher education—chief among which is its historical commitment to the liberal arts and to the humanities—even as current fiscal stringencies are pressing hard upon it. That the U.S. system is at the apogee of its worldwide influence while increasingly undervalued at home is ironic, to say the least. Even as public disinvestment in higher education continues apace here, many national educational systems are converging on American models. Observers in the United States have witnessed the astonishing expansion and ambition of higher education throughout the world, especially in Asia, with a raft of mixed feelings, but we would do well do observe how others have come to value what we are now putting at risk.

Richard Levin, president of Yale University, has documented in a recent article what he terms “the rise of Asia’s universities.” The “governments of China, India, Singapore and South
Korea,” he reports, “understand that world-class universities are the ideal place to educate students for careers in science, industry, government, and civil society—creating people who have the intellectual breadth and critical-thinking skills to solve problems, to innovate, and to lead.” Scientists, engineers, and corporate leaders here have pointed to this Asian university boom and warned of a “gathering storm” of economic and educational competition in which those nations will dwarf American educational capacities and by extension, economic innovation and productivity.

But President Levin notes a somewhat different dynamic: “While U.S. and British politicians worry that Asia, and China in particular, is training more scientists and engineers than the West,” he writes, “the Chinese and others in Asia are worrying that their students lack the independence and creativity necessary for their countries’ long-term economic growth. They feel that specialization makes their graduates narrow and that traditional Asian pedagogy makes them unimaginative. Officials in China, Singapore, and South Korea have become increasingly attracted to the American model of undergraduate education,” a model of multidisciplinary liberal education that includes the humanities. This was the vision of the Morrill Act 150 years ago. I think we should not lose sight of it now.

Let me conclude with a final centennial reference, which is drawn from the British statesman Viscount Richard Haldane. In 1912, Viscount Haldane, one of the founders of the London School of Economics and Political Science, published a series of essays entitled Universities and National Life, in which he argues that, “to maintain the University at a high level is an act of high patriotism on the part of the citizens,” for, “it is in the Universities… that we see how the soul of a people at its highest mirrors itself.” With the university’s increasingly global footprint, the correspondence between national ethos and the scholarly community instantiated within it becomes more complicated, but also more dynamic. It becomes all the more necessary that the critical and interpretive power of the humanities lie at the heart of the global university.

So what is the value proposition for the humanities? They pursue relentless inquiry into the question of value itself. Human beings seek and create meaning and value in language, literature, art, music, science, and in their very history. Students in the humanities, whether undergraduates in the classroom or senior faculty engaged in research, work constantly to understand, interpret, and question those values. Some may be discomforted that the humanities often unsettle conventional world-views, but that is how we make progress as a nation, as nations, and in the world. We must assert that case, we can assert that case, and we can do so without apology. Thank you.

_Jessie Ann Owens, Dean of the Division of Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Studies:_ I want to begin by asking you how you view emerging fields in the humanities and, for example, the digital humanities. It’s sometimes hard for fields to come into focus and for universities to understand how to help them flourish, and I wonder what perspective you might have on that from the ACLS.

_Pauline Yu:_ That’s a good question. I think there is, at this point, no question that the medium with which people are working is a digital one. The future of scholarship is going to be produced and disseminated and preserved digitally.
It’s also true that digital technologies are very useful in understanding the past, whether it be through databases that have been compiled and now can be analyzed or texts that have been scanned that people can now search for or archeological evidence that can be analyzed as well.

So I think that the digital humanities may become a term that is as obsolete as the print humanities are now. We don’t say “the print humanities” when we’re usually focused on talking about things that are going to appear in printed form. It may be that within our lifetime we won’t be talking about the digital humanities; we’ll simply be talking about the humanities and assuming that digital methodologies are central to the practice.

This is not to say that I think that print is going to go away or that print publication isn’t going to continue. I’m one who believes that the imminent death of the book is something that has been prematurely announced. Just look at your bookshelves and ask if you think that there is a scarcity of books at this point. Now there are some challenges that face presses, but that’s a different question.

This is not to say that the question of the digital humanities doesn’t raise questions about what methodologies people should be favoring. These things are perennial; they’re cyclical. Every ten years or so ACLS has issued a report on means of scholarly communication, and it’s always been to announce that something new has happened, but it seems as though the evolution does sometimes take a while.

What’s interesting about the digital humanities is that it reflects the fact that these digital technologies are now everybody’s to use. If you think back 50 years ago, who got to use computers? Universities, the military, a few corporations. Now everybody does, and now I think faculty have to recognize the fact that students are equally, if not more, comfortable using digital technologies than print technologies.

But the digital humanities are referring to the ability of scholars now to look at texts with these new tools to ask new questions of texts, to be able to disseminate them in new ways, and we are seeing centers of digital humanities being created at various universities. There’s a sort of parallel organization of centers of digital humanities (CenterNet) that mirrors the consortium of humanities centers and institutes that CHCI [Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes] brings together, the 160 or so humanities centers around the world. Eventually, I think they will all come together, and I’m sure I think at Davis here, many of your projects involve digital technology.

I think it’s very exciting to me to see that humanists, of whom it has, I think, quite unfairly and incorrectly been said that they are unduly conservative in their approaches to knowledge,
are in fact some of the real innovators in the academy in using these technologies to ask new questions of old materials.

**Owens:** You mentioned the centers. I’d like your thoughts on the changing landscape and infrastructure of the humanities, all sorts of humanities centers with fellowships and Learned Societies obviously and other kinds of structures. Do you have a sense of where all this is going? It seems much more complicated than it once was.

**Yu:** How many people think that there is even an infrastructure in the humanities? It’s often invisible to us, but most obvious probably is faculty and students in the structures of departments at universities. That’s what we’re most familiar with.

But there are many other structures and organizations that actually play a very important role in our research and teaching activities. The humanities center, which Davis has an excellent example of, is one. It’s a wonderful space to bring people together from different departments who are looking at problems across departmental lines that could best be answered by more than one person knocking his or her head against somebody else’s, and so I think these provide a terrific kind of laboratory for the humanities that is an international phenomenon; the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes has in its membership such centers that really are all over the world, and it meets all over the world as well. These humanities centers are an important space for faculty to conduct their research and scholarly activities.

Learned societies are an equally important structure that is outside the university that is a very important place for people within a particular discipline to gather together to talk about issues of shared concern, to establish the standards of the discipline through the journal, through the papers that are presented at annual conferences and such.

These are organizations that survive with three sources of revenue: membership dues, revenues from their journals, and revenues from their annual meetings, and this tripod of support is something that I think the societies themselves are becoming increasingly worried about it as the financial stringencies have affected the lives of all of us.

I don’t need to tell you. You’ve been president of two Learned Societies, I think, and there are other presidents of Learned Societies here in this room, too, and we all know that these are important for the kind of solidarity benefits that they provide to us as academics who want to reach out to others in our field, but we also know that they are as fragile as any organization today might be and yet, I think, a very important element of our world. They are organizations that depend on essentially volunteer leadership, and people are very busy.

But it’s interesting because when I talk to presidents of learned societies and ask them if they’re concerned about membership, they often say, “Well, yes we are, and we think it’s probably because people are so busy in their own home institutions. They can’t participate in the activities of the learned society.”

When I talk to deans of universities and ask them what’s the citizenship of their faculty like and they say, “Well, they’re never around. They’re all busy in their learned societies. I don’t know where the faculty are.” Each one thinks that the other one has claimed the allegiance of faculty, but I think the fact is that both do, but each individual’s faculty member’s time is limited and yet clearly each of these elements of the world in which we function provide very valuable benefits to us.
Owens: I’ve often tried to suss out why UC Davis seems to do well with ACLS Fellowships, and one of the answers I think is that we are a relatively new humanities division in some ways, and it’s a division built on the premise that we are part of the public mission of this land grant institution, and we are kind of fearless in trying to figure out a new way of doing the humanities. I don’t know whether that’s the right answer or not, but I’m struck by the fact that we do better with ACLS than we do in some more conservative kinds of competitions, and I’m wondering about your role as the leader of ACLS: how you are helping shape the changes and developments in the humanities through the way you’re funding what projects you choose to fund?

Yu: Well, on the one hand, I don’t want to take any credit for how you are doing. The UC Davis performance in our competitions is really exceptional. I told you, it’s about twice as successful as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Columbia. It’s just really, really quite remarkable and I personally don’t have anything to do with it! These are the judgments of peer reviewers whom we do consider to be the most broad-thinking, enlightened scholars in the country who come together and really thrash through the process of winnowing down a list of awards to the lucky few. I think that it’s interesting that you think that ACLS is more forward-thinking because I think for a long time it had the reputation of being probably more conservative or backward-thinking. I do think that we have programs that recognize forward-moving developments in the field. We have programs that support the digital humanities, for example, fellowship programs. We have a fellowship program that supports collaborative research in the humanities. That was not a very commonly found opportunity until just a few years ago. So in that sense, our programs are perhaps riding the crest of certain waves.

But I have to say that, as far as the overall competitions are concerned, it’s a judgment of quality made by very smart people in a room who have a lot of things to choose from, and I think you should just take pleasure in that.