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Report to the Council

**2011 Annual Meeting
American Council of Learned Societies
Friday, May 6, 2011
Washington, D.C.**

**Pauline Yu
President, American Council of Learned Societies**

It was three years ago, the spring of 2008, when we signed the contracts to hold this meeting in Washington. Think about how much has happened in that short time: the market meltdown that triggered the Great Recession, the election of Barack Obama, the TARP, the bailouts, the emergence of the Tea Party, the Congressional elections of last year, and, still ongoing, budget confrontations that threaten to close the government or lead to default on our national credit. The sudden and sharp crisis of finance capital seems to have abated—you just heard of the improving position of the ACLS endowment and reserves—but we are now confronted by a crisis in public finance besetting Washington, state capitals, and city halls around the country.

Since we are in Washington, D.C., it's only fitting that we consider Washington folkways. It is one of the U.S. Senate's more venerable traditions to ask one of its members to read George Washington's Farewell Address to the American people each year on February 22, the official date of Washington's birthday. Of course, there has been some considerable public agitation of late around the subject of presidential nativities. If you are inclined to investigate these subjects, the question of Washington's birthday might provoke suspicion. His birthday was originally recorded as February 11, but was later changed to February 22. Why? Who had something to hide? The purported explanation is that the British Empire shifted from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, and earlier birthdates had to be adjusted. This excuse only raises other questions: could George Washington, the father of our country, have been born in the British Empire, and not the United States? We'll have to ask Donald Trump to look into this.

Regardless of where or when he was born, our first president had wise guidance for Congress and his successors, whom he advised to “promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is

essential that public opinion should be enlightened.” Washington’s argument that organized knowledge is an essential element of free government was enacted in the Morrill Act of 1862, which foresaw a vibrant set of land-grant universities providing both practical and liberal arts education as a vindication of democracy. Washington’s assertion echoed again in the 1964 report of the Commission on the Humanities sponsored by ACLS, the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, and the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa. The Commission’s formulation that “democracy demands wisdom” helped convince the Congress of the wisdom of establishing the National Endowment for the Humanities.

But that Washington is not today’s Washington. You know that President Barack Obama is a former university law professor and an accomplished, articulate author who—unusual for an American politician—actually writes the books that bear his name. Our president is a forceful advocate of education and research. You might predict, therefore, that he would include the National Endowment for the Humanities among those research and education agencies exempt from the reductions applied to all “discretionary spending.” You would be wrong to do so. It is a stark and unambiguous comment on public appreciation of the humanities that President Obama’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2012 seeks an increase of 13% in the appropriation for the National Science Foundation (NSF) yet proposes to cut the funding of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) by the same percentage. And this is the position of the Democratic administration. A substantial fraction of Congressional Republicans have proposed abolishing the NEH altogether. The recent agreement between Congress and the White House that obviated a government shutdown cut 7% from the NEH’s fiscal year 2011 budget, while the NSF’s budget was cut by just 1%.

What disadvantages the humanities during such crucial budgetary deliberations? One reason the humanities are weakened is that they are not understood as research enterprises. We need to recover the vision that strengthening and broadening higher education is essential to democracy both as a solvent for the calcifications of social caste and as a seedbed of diverse opinion. We need also to assert strongly that the humanities and humanities research produce new knowledge that is important not just on its own terms, but in relation to the entire spectrum of human inquiry. As Howard Mumford Jones, the then chairman of ACLS, put it more than 60 years ago: “[W]ithout the activity of humanities scholars, about one-third of our available information about the human would grow more untrustworthy and eventually disappear.” The achievements of ACLS fellows richly illustrate the knowledge gained from humanities research.

Efforts are indeed afoot to press this case. If you attended the annual meeting of the National Humanities Alliance and Humanities Advocacy Day, both organized by Jessica Jones Irons and her colleagues, you heard of a new Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences organized by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. ACLS Board Chair Anthony Appiah and I are both members of this commission—to be co-chaired by President Richard Brodhead of Duke University

and Chairman John W. Rowe of the Exelon Corporation—whose mission is to respond to the following charge from Congress:

What are the top ten actions that Congress, state governments, universities, foundations, educators, individual benefactors, and others should take now to maintain national excellence in humanities and social scientific scholarship and education, and to achieve long-term national goals for our intellectual and economic well-being; for a stronger, more vibrant civil society; and for the success of cultural diplomacy in the twenty-first century?

Of course, shelves groan with the products of past commissions. Sitting on mine is *The Humanities and American Life*, the 1980 report of the Commission on the Humanities sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. It opens with a remarkable metaphor designed to convey the meaning of the humanities:

Nailed to the ship's mast in *Moby-Dick* is a gold doubloon stamped with signs and symbols "in luxuriant profusion." The coin is Captain Ahab's promised reward to the crewman who sights the white whale, but in its emblems each man reads his own meaning. As Ahab says, "This round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self."

Like the bright doubloon, the humanities mirror our own image and our image of the world. Through the humanities we reflect on the fundamental question: what does it mean to be human? The humanities offer clues but never a complete answer."

This compelling metaphor draws from the subject of humanistic study—a powerful and complex text, a masterpiece of world literature—and projects Captain Ahab's metaphor onto the humanities as a whole. It well fits the humanities scholars' conception of our intellectual project: reflective, reflexive, open-ended and indeterminate. But does it resonate with the civilian reader? Is the gaudy prize offered by a vengeful obsessive to a ship of doomed men the most salubrious possible image of the humanities? And is self-knowledge only a private reward? I leave that to your judgment.

There is another notable passage in the 1980 Commission report. Robert M. Lumiansky, my predecessor as president of ACLS and a member of the Commission, convinced his colleagues to include a plea for the support of our Council. "The ACLS is a re-grant agency," the commission noted, "and funds to support its central programs will be exhausted after 1982." Without extraordinary help, "the future financial stability—indeed the very existence—of the ACLS is imperiled."

It is a great satisfaction to report to you today that the very existence of our Council is not, in fact, imperiled. While our resources are not yet commensurate with the necessity and ambition of our mission, we are fortunate that over the past 30 years support from foundations, universities, colleges, the federal government, as well as from individual friends and former fellows, has allowed ACLS to grow in its ability to serve the scholarly community. As you have heard from ACLS Board Treasurer Nancy J. Vickers and Director of Finance Larry Wirth, our endowment continues to recover from the losses of the Great Recession. An enormously significant booster for that recovery came in March when The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded ACLS \$6 million to be deposited in the general administration fund that supports our work as a federation of learned societies and as a representative of humanities scholarship. That ACLS has emphasized building our endowment devoted to fellowships ahead of support for our administrative and federative functions reflects our core commitments (and that relatively few donors are prepared to fund general purposes). We are grateful to have the Mellon Foundation as such a supportive partner of both our mission to advance humanistic studies through fellowship awards and our efforts to maintain and strengthen the infrastructure of scholarship as represented by learned societies.

As Nicole Stahlmann, director of fellowship programs, has reported, ACLS awarded nearly \$15 million in fellowship stipends to scholars in the United States and abroad in the competitions concluded this spring. Later this morning, we will hear from three fellows, each representing one of the 15 programs ACLS mounted this past year. As is true of our investment portfolio, we have a diversified set of fellowship programs, each with a distinctive strategy but all seeking to identify future value in the current promise and past performance of the thousands of applicants who present themselves to us. I want to repeat Nicole's commendation of the enormous efficiency and dedication of our small fellowships staff who administer the competitions. Dedicated also, indeed selflessly dedicated, are the nearly 500 scholars who served as peer reviewers at the different stages of our several competitions. I have been a member of the Burkhardt Fellowship selection committee since it began in 2000, so I know how hard it is to find the time to read, evaluate, and compare applications. But I also know that if scholars want to set the future course of research in the humanities, we must be willing to exercise this most basic act of scholarly self-governance.

Our set of fellowship programs covers almost every stage of the scholarly career, from dissertation research forward. Other programs focus on particular world areas—China and East Europe—or on especially promising but sometimes undervalued methodologies, such as collaborative or digital research. But it is our central fellowship program, the competition open to individuals from all fields, ranks, and institutions (or, indeed, from none at all, as independent scholars do apply and succeed), that remains the lodestar of our efforts to support research. This is the only ACLS program supported by an endowment. Since former ACLS President John H. D'Arms began the reinvigoration of this program in 1997, the

endowment has grown to more than three times the size of our administrative fund, thanks to the support of many, especially that of our research university consortium. That growth has allowed us to increase the size and number of fellowship stipends we award. The decline in asset values brought about by the Great Recession has retarded our progress, but I am delighted to report to you that yesterday our board agreed with my proposal that we resume the upward trajectory and increase the size of stipends. In next year's competition, therefore, fellowships for full professors will carry awards of \$65,000, with those for associates set at \$45,000 and for assistant professors \$35,000. Since 1997, ACLS has helped set the pace among the too few national organizations offering research fellowships to humanities scholars, and we must continue to do so.

But we must also continue to increase the number of fellowships we can offer. As Nicole noted, the ratio of applicants to awardees across all our programs is 15 to 1. Our rigorous fellowship selection panels regularly report that they could award many more fellowships if they were available, with no diminution in the quality of the scholars or research projects supported. Put another way, increased investment in new knowledge will likely yield large dividends. I am grateful that we have received significant help from the National Endowment for the Humanities in our unceasing efforts to increase our investment. You have in your agenda books a copy of the Endowment's offer to us of a \$500,000 challenge grant, the proceeds of which will be deposited in our fellowships endowment. This is the largest such grant made by the NEH last year, and it requires us to raise matching funds in a ratio of 3 to 1. So please be prepared to receive a plea from me for your help in making that match. I would ask the Congress and the administration's budget-makers to consider carefully the enormous financial leverage these NEH grants achieve. And not just challenge grants: almost every NEH award is premised upon a public-private partnership that extends federal dollars, as just the fact of a federal award helps recipient agencies raise funds.

In the past two years, we have begun to extend our model of a fellowship beyond the support of an individual scholar (or group of scholars, in our collaborative program) to experiments with supporting scholars in a particular placement that will advance their careers. The New Faculty Fellows (NFF) program has been a remarkably effective experiment along these lines. Many of you have worked directly with Nicole and her team to rapidly implement this experiment, which again demonstrated the value of national peer review in identifying academic promise. This was always intended as a temporary measure, and is a fairly expensive one, with a large number of fellows all of whom receive two-year stipends. We were delighted when the Mellon Foundation funded a second NFF competition and placement process, but agreed with our foundation colleague to pause after this competition in order to consider next steps in the post-doctoral space. Even absent a new competition, the activities of the New Faculty Fellows program will continue. Following the careers of these two cohorts of fellows should tell us much about how careers are formed in this new era.

Reviewing the set of applications to this program made it clear that a substantial “post-doc interval” is becoming a more widespread reality in the humanities. New Ph.D.s are more likely to spend a year or two—or more—as adjuncts, in formal post-doc programs, or just keeping it together somehow. Only a relative few move directly from doctoral study to tenure-track job. We all need to better understand the dynamics of the post-doc space and the humanities. Our grant from the Mellon Foundation for the New Faculty Fellows program has given us some funds to begin surveying this territory and considering how we might highlight best practices and catalyze the very best of those. We will be cooperating with CHIC, the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, and with our Research University Consortium in doing so.

Nicole mentioned earlier another new program, also funded by the Mellon Foundation, that will extend our experiments in placing young scholars. Our new Public Fellows program works with nonprofit and government agencies interested in appointing fellows to appropriate positions for a two-year period. This effort, too, has been a quick-start experiment. Over the past months my colleagues and I worked with dispatch to secure agreements with six agencies to participate in our initial competition. ACLS committees will review and select a short list of nominees for each open position. Receiving agencies will consider these nominated applicants and offer their choices two-year appointments pursuant to a hosting agreement worked out with ACLS. The grant will cover the cost of salaries and/or stipends for the fellows as well as any specialized training appropriate to the position. Hopefully, these initial appointments will in many cases eventuate into permanent jobs, and this experience will advantage all fellows in developing a vocation in the public realm beyond the academy. We also expect that this signal effort, properly publicized by ACLS, will both demonstrate the wide applicability of humanities doctoral education and help expand the academy’s conceptions of the destination of Ph.D. study.

Please note: these are not new ideas. More than a decade ago, Mellon funded studies of Ph.D. cohorts 10 years beyond the degree that found high job satisfaction and career success among those working in business, nonprofit organizations, and the government—or the “BNG” sector. The Woodrow Wilson National Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching both argued for an affirmative inclusion of nonacademic careers in university placement efforts. Several of our societies have made the same assertion. But if we are to increase the social valuation of humanities education, it is worth exemplifying again the wide applicability of that study.

In asserting our firm belief that the capacities developed by doctoral education in the humanities have great value and relevance beyond the academy, we are in no way lessening or qualifying our concern for the academic career path. You may have noticed that the list of annual meeting participants includes a number of ACLS Frederick Burkhardt Residential Fellows. On Saturday they will be joining in a celebration of the first decade of this program, which, in targeting recently

tenured faculty, helped inaugurate a series of new initiatives focused on different stages of the scholarly career. The celebration will be an opportunity for colleagues of a distinctive academic cohort—those who have received tenure in the past 13 years—to consider the particular stresses and satisfactions of being midcareer in the changing academy. This convocation is one instance of the effort we make to build community among our fellows. We have held regular gatherings of our Ryskamp Fellows, and Nicole convenes groups of Dissertation Completion Fellows for seminars focused on preparation for the academic job market.

Burkhardt Fellows take up residence during their fellowship at a select number of national centers for advanced study. One of those is the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress, on whose Scholars Council I am pleased to serve. This splendid facility provides opportunities for immersion in the unsurpassed resources, both human and material, of the Library of Congress. The Center also aims to provide legislators with opportunities to have informal conversations with the world's best scholars. In addition to awarding the \$1 million Kluge Prize in the humanities and social sciences—whose recipients have included ACLS Haskins Prize lecturers John Hope Franklin and Peter Brown—the Kluge Center awards 12 long-term and 3 short-term fellowships to applicants each year and invites especially distinguished scholars to hold a number of named chairs. These fellowships and partnerships with organizations such as ACLS, along with the symposia, conferences, and summer institutes organized by the Center, enable it to host some 80 to 100 scholars each year. The Kluge Center is located just off the Great Hall of the Library of Congress, where we will hold the reception after this evening's Haskins Prize Lecture; I hope you will find a few minutes then to visit the Center, a home for scholars on Capitol Hill. We are grateful to Associate Librarian Carolyn Brown, Deputy Librarian Deanna Marcum, and Librarian James H. Billington for accommodating our desire to celebrate the humanities at the Library tonight and for contributing in so many ways.

The Burkhardt Fellowship program bears the name of Frederick H. Burkhardt, who was president of ACLS from 1957 to 1974. Two months ago, President Obama honored another of our former presidents by awarding the National Humanities Medal to Stanley N. Katz. Over a career of more than 50 years, Stan's achievements as a teacher, scholar, leader, and advocate have contributed significantly to our understanding of the humanities and of American history. Merely counting the publications and offices listed on his c.v. would, I think, put him in the rank of previous medal recipients. But such an exercise would miss one of the defining qualities of Stan's career and one of his great contributions to the humanities enterprise. Stan is a catalyst. When he engages with people, ideas, and institutions, he transforms them and their interaction. He unleashes energy, enthusiasm, and understanding that his interlocutors did not know they had before they met him, but which persist long after. In his 11 years as president of the American Council of Learned Societies, he significantly expanded ACLS's presence in the academic and public humanities. He recognized that if the

humanities were to thrive in the late twentieth century and beyond, the field could not rely on its past academic prestige alone, but needed the combined energies and dedication of all who found value and meaning in its work. President Obama's honoring of Stan brought honor to ACLS as well, and for that we thank both him and, of course, Stan himself.

The international work of ACLS, ably led by Andrzej W. Tymowski, is logically symmetrical with the role of ACLS in the United States. Our largest current programs, the African Humanities Program and the Humanities Program in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine (both funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York) seek to build durable scholarly communities—proto-learned societies—from the networks developed out of regional peer-reviewed fellowship competitions. Indeed, in the future, the learned society enterprise as we know it will be increasingly globalized. At its meeting held in Vancouver this past fall, the ACLS Conference of Administrative Officers organized discussions focused on international meetings and membership. It soon became clear that the U.S. learned societies have a global prestige that acts as a magnetic force pulling their boundaries outward beyond our borders.

Last year's annual meeting featured a panel discussing the pending Google Books settlement and the implications for humanities scholarship of mass digitization. Federal Judge Denny Chin's rejection of the settlement seems to have closed, at least for now, one route to the digital future, thereby giving more urgency to discussions about more federated digital libraries, including that proposed by Harvard University Librarian Robert Darnton.

ACLS is not engaged in mass-digitization, but our Humanities E-Book (HEB) collection has been remarkably successful in digitizing and distributing more than 500 carefully selected titles of established scholarly quality and enduring utility. HEB has grown in content, functionality, and subscriptions and has achieved at least provisional financial sustainability. In terms of ACLS programming, it is both an innovation—an in-house business—and the latest in a long series of projects and reports concerning scholarly communication that spans over half a century. Our project has outlasted many other digital initiatives thanks to its keen and deliberate management by Ronald G. Musto and Eileen Gardiner. We are now in the twelfth year of this venture, and it will be momentous one.

Much is happening in the wider e-book domain. New e-book readers are being developed, and more and more entities are distributing e-books. JSTOR and Project MUSE are adding e-books to their established offerings of e-journals. But HEB's next challenge will be its most significant, since Ron and Eileen will be leaving ACLS at the end of June. Actually, I misspoke: they will be leaving 633 Third Avenue but not ACLS, for they will be sharing the position of executive director of the Medieval Academy of America and editor of its journal, *Speculum*. I'm sure Charles Homer Haskins, the first chairman of ACLS and a founder of the Medieval Academy, would be delighted with the symmetry of it all. I want to

thank Ron and Eileen for their leadership of the project. We have convened an advisory group to help us think about just how we can consolidate and build upon what Ron and Eileen have achieved.

Before taking questions, let me return to a larger frame around ACLS and our learned societies. In the past months we've seen more than the usual number of conversations and conferences that take as their starting point the premise of crisis in the university in general and in the humanities in particular. There has been a rich harvest of books with the same focus. In such an atmosphere we often find a longing for the academic Eden of the mid-twentieth century. In the past 40 years, U.S. universities and colleges have deployed many expedients and adjustments aimed at getting back to the conditions of the golden age after World War II, when funding, enrollments, and public support were all on the increase. As government support has declined, tuitions have been raised, and better-off parents in the United States—and indeed, from around the world—have been willing to pay. Double-digit endowment returns have funded plant and program expansion. Increased use of contingent faculty has become a convenient, if perilous, budgetary expedient. But now many agree these strategies are maxed out.

We seem to be working out a new relationship between the state, society, and the university, one in which market memes dominate the discussion and higher education is conceived of more as a commodity than as a community. In this new context, the concept of education becomes interchangeable with “workforce preparation” or “training.” Much of the current policy discourse treats higher education as a private good. It is seen as a means of individual career advancement, and not, as in the past, as a public good—as the means by which society makes a collective investment in human capital, an investment that will bring returns to the whole society, not the least of which is the assurance that a broad swath of the population has opportunities for social mobility. This is why we should bear in mind those wise words of George Washington.

Some worry that in advocating for the humanities, we need to choose between arguing for the utility of humanistic study and making the case for its intrinsic value. But we don't need to make such a choice. The study of the humanities provides the knowledge, analytical experience, and interpretive strategies that are important in individual and social life. Today, politics is preoccupied with the issue of debt, for in the world of finance, the past may beggar and impoverish the future. From the standpoint of the humanities, the past enriches. The wisdom and perspectives derived from the knowledge, interpretation, and appreciation of the cultural record of human creativity make us whole in the present and can carry us to the future.

A wise colleague once answered the question of why the study of the humanities is worthwhile by comparing that enterprise with astronomy. Our society invests heavily in the technology and expertise needed to see ever deeper into the skies.

Why do we do so? There are many practical motives, to be sure, but the most basic reason is the simplest: we want—we need—to understand our place in the universe. And so it is with research and education in the humanities and interpretive social sciences. Our students deserve the opportunity to achieve that understanding, and our faculty colleagues deserve the research opportunities to improve the knowledge on which it is based. That is indeed a bright spot on the horizon and is a grand project for our advocacy. And how else, as George Washington advised, can public opinion be enlightened?

Thank you.