It is a pleasure to welcome you back to Philadelphia. This historic city has been the most frequent site of ACLS Annual Meetings in the twenty-first century, and in the eighteenth century saw the founding of the American Philosophical Society, the site of this evening’s Haskins Prize Lecture and the oldest of the member societies of ACLS. Now, the two collective nouns in the name “American Council of Learned Societies” are not always easy to parse. When explaining ACLS to new acquaintances, and making clear that we are not the ACLU, my colleagues and I have trained ourselves for signs of incipient perplexity on our interlocutors’ faces as they try to sort all the memberships implied in our name. We can imagine a listener running through permutations of one of the fictional sponsors of Garrison Keillor’s *A Prairie Home Companion*:

The National Federation of Associations  
The Associated Federation of Organizations  
The Federated Organization of Associations  
The Federation of Associated Organizations

These re-combinations provoke the thought that ACLS could alternatively be styled as the “American Society of Learned Councils.” I don’t think that suits us quite right, but at least it would alleviate the all too frequent confusion of our acronym with that of the “other” ACLS: medical training in Advanced Cardiovascular Life Support.

But Mr. Keillor also sometimes invokes another sponsor that resonates well with this crowd: the Professional Association of English Majors. As he was one such himself, perhaps we can forgive him for making gentle sport of the vocational uncertainty he sometimes attaches to studying literature. I have to say it seems to have worked out rather well for him. Indeed, he has put his training to good use in his imaginative construction of times and places just far enough beyond recent memory to be tinged with nostalgia while still readily accessible as cultural touchstones. Garrison Keillor’s nostalgia is, of course, self-consciously ironic, allowing his listeners to bypass sentimentality and proceed directly to a sense of their own sophistication.
In the humanities, we are self-consciously historical, but we can fall into an unhealthy nostalgia for an imagined academic past, a nostalgia that diminishes our actual present. I’ve spent a lot of this past year inveighing against the narrative of decline so common today. Those who tell that story are quick to fault the humanities for its own troubles: students have deserted the humanities, it is argued, to escape the abstruse theory that impoverishes in favor of the emotional and practical engagement that enriches.

The data, however, suggest a much more complicated picture. In fact, as Ben Schmidt pointed out last year, it depends on when you start counting, and, indeed, humanities degrees as a percentage of all degrees awarded have held steady over recent decades.\(^1\) Michael Bérubé has made a similar point, emphasizing that the percentage of arts and humanities degrees awarded in 2010 was the same as at their peak in 1970: 17 percent.\(^2\)

This morning I, too, want to look back, with admiration but without lament. I want to focus on 1964, a date not beyond the memory of at least some in this room (you know who you are) but certainly a different moment. I will commemorate the report issued that year by the Commission on the Humanities, convened by ACLS, the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, and the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa. That report and the advocacy organized around it were critical to convincing Congress to create the National Endowment for the Humanities the following year. There were several grand projects and great events in 1964, the Civil Rights Act being perhaps the most significant. But I don’t celebrate the Commission report to premise a narrative of decline; rather, I want to inventory the arguments then made for public support of the humanities. I think they have been vindicated by the passage of a half-century and are very much present in the work of ACLS today.

The challenge of making the case for the humanities is, as you know, a regular theme of ACLS gatherings. In 2006, our annual meeting was a joint convocation with the Association of American Universities on that very subject. At the 2013 meeting, I anticipated the report of a successor commission, this one appointed by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, our second-oldest member society. That report, entitled *The Heart of the Matter*, continues to be a focus for discussion and a prompt for advocacy. I don’t think it will diminish the force of the latter report if we alloy with it some of the strongest arguments from 50 years ago. Three of these stand out:

- the declaration that the humanities have a profoundly public purpose.
- the contention that there is a centering integrity to the humanities beyond their instrumental utility, and
- the unapologetic assertion that the humanities are intellectually vital fields of inquiry.

But before elaborating on those points, I should sketch the background of the 1964 report by putting it in the context of the history of ACLS. Fifty years ago, ACLS was only a few years beyond a real crisis, the resolution of which truly re-defined our organization. In 1957, ACLS was on the edge of bankruptcy. Professor Howard Mumford Jones, the Council’s chair, has left us a description of the Council’s headquarters, then in Washington, before the subsequent revival. I have quoted it before, but I hope you won’t mind hearing it again. It’s worth it.

The ACLS was housed on the second floor of an ancient brick building not far from the Capitol. This might well have been built for the Pecksniff firm when Martin Chuzzlewit was a new book. . . . There were a few modern touches, like

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a telephone or two and some typewriters, but when one opened the door to ACLS for the first time, he stepped back a hundred years.

This looked like the end of the line for the American Council of Learned Societies. There was about enough money in the treasury to pay the staff for the next three months, and I could not see any prospect of income beyond that time.3

As you will hear in the next hour from Nancy Vickers, the treasurer of ACLS, we are today in a much more salubrious position and the line of our work is not near an end but extends far into the horizon. But the foundation of that good health was laid when Professors Jones and Whitney Oates asked Frederick Burkhardt to become president of ACLS, moved the Council’s offices to New York, and undertook to build a program that could attract regular support and endowment funds.

Beyond ACLS, Burkhardt, Jones, and Oates confronted an additional problem: the humanities had not found a firm footing under the growing canopy of federal funding. This challenge can be compared to one from the early twentieth century, when another new regime of national funding for university research, that of the philanthropic foundations, took science as its reigning model. Indeed, the term “scientific philanthropy” is how early foundation managers distinguished themselves from mere charity. The leaders of the early ACLS worked to create a place for the humanities in that model and in so doing helped establish the partnership of our Council and philanthropic foundations that persists today. But after World War II, it became clear that a new regime was emerging, one in which federal support defined national priorities in research and education. The 1964 Commission, chaired by Brown University president Barnaby Keeney, was the culmination of efforts to get federal recognition for the humanities just as their predecessors had won foundation recognition.

Commission Report

The core of the 1964 Commission’s report is a succinct 15 pages. Much longer appendices included a statement on the humanities and the schools, libraries for the humanities, and separate reports from 24 ACLS member societies.

The Commission defined the humanities not with a list of academic specializations but with a description of their social functions. “The humanities are the study of that which is most human,” the Commission pronounced on the first page of the report, adding, “The humanities may be regarded as a body of knowledge and insight, as modes of expression, as a program for education, as an underlying attitude toward life. . . . [That] attitude toward life centers on concern for the human individual: for his emotional development, for his moral, religious, and aesthetic ideas, and for his goals—including in particular his growth as a rational being and a responsible member of his community. 4

The primacy of science in contemporary culture obliges advocates for the humanities now to make their case conscious of that reigning ideal. I would note that Deborah Fitzgerald, MIT’s dean of humanities, arts, and social sciences, did so compellingly in a recent Boston Globe op-ed on the power of the humanities, where she asserted that “the world’s problems are never tidily confined to the laboratory or


Members of the 1964 Commission warned that the already evident “imbalance” in the funding and size of the two enterprises would not only warp the national culture but disadvantage science itself:

Science is far more than a tool for adding to our security and comfort. It embraces in its broadest sense all efforts to achieve valid and coherent views of reality; as such, it extends the boundaries of experience and adds new dimensions to human character. . . . Through the humanities we may seek intellectual humility, sensitivity to beauty, and emotional discipline. By them we may come to know the excitement of ideas, the power of imagination, and the unsuspected energies of the creative spirit.  

One of the report’s formulations of the public purpose of the humanities was repeated in the legislation creating the NEH: “Democracy demands wisdom of the average man.” A complementary passage of the report was the inspiration for our panel session this afternoon: “This Commission conceives of the humanities, not merely as academic disciplines confined to schools and colleges, but as functioning components of society which affect the lives and well-being of all the population.”

When Fred Burkhardt testified in support of the legislation creating NEH he made the same point this way: “If what was at stake here were nothing more than the pleadings of a group of scholars who wanted more for themselves, or who were selfishly concerned for the advancement of their own narrow specialties, I can assure you that I would not be appearing before you today. Or, if I did appear, it would be to take the other side. The fact is, however, that the case for support of the humanities is the case for the preservation and improvement of the very bases of our civilization.”

Advocates for the humanities seek to balance arguments for the instrumental utility of humanistic study with declarations of its intrinsic value. To my mind, this has never been an either/or, but always rather a “both/and” proposition: the humanities have immediate application in the world precisely because they deal with ultimate concerns. The authors and allies of the 1964 report achieved this balance by foregrounding the normative and ethical dimensions of the humanities. Howard Mumford Jones, then president of the Modern Language Association, stated to a US Senate committee that “Nothing is more necessary to a nation than the general acceptance of principles of intellectual and moral integrity.”

Another member of the Commission, Thomas J. Watson, Jr., then chairman of the board of IBM, put what he called “a fighting case for the humanities” this way:

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5 Fitzgerald, Deborah K. “At MIT, the humanities are just as important as STEM.” The Boston Globe. Boston Globe, 30 April 2014. Web. 9 July 2014.
6 National Commission on the Humanities. 2-3.
7 National Commission on the Humanities. 4, 2. The 2014 ACLS Annual Meeting panel session was entitled “The Public Face of the Humanities.”
Most important of all, to resolve the fundamental issues we face today, it is not enough to know the right. What we need over and above knowledge of the right is an inspired will to do the right as individuals and as a society. Such inspiration, even in an age of the most advanced thinking machines we can imagine, will continue to be the province of the humanities, of literature, philosophy and the arts.  

In an essay on the history of NEH funding, Malcolm Richardson notes that the Commission’s report provided the administration with a formulation through which to promote separate agencies for the humanities, on the one hand, and the arts, on the other. Indeed, he states that the rationale for a separate humanities agency was a key factor in overcoming longstanding political resistance to arts funding; without the NEH, neither of the endowments would have come into being. White House endorsement came in September 1964 when President Johnson, speaking at Brown University, declared: “[T]here just simply must be no neglect of humanities. The values of our free and compassionate society are as vital to our national success as the skills of our technical and scientific age. And I look with the greatest of favor upon the proposal by your own able President Keeney’s Commission for a National Foundation for the Humanities.”

Our predecessors a half-century ago were becomingly unapologetic in proclaiming the intellectual vitality of work in our fields. I’ll conclude this review of the 1964 Commission’s report by again quoting Fred Burkhardt’s testimony to Congress: “. . . the undeniable needs of the humanities, particularly in the areas of basic research and advanced scholarship, are a function of the strength rather than the weakness of humanistic scholarship in the United States in our time.” Referring to statements from learned societies appended to the report, Fred noted that “With no exception, they speak of the vitality and richness of American scholarship and look forward to even greater achievements in the future.”

He continued: “Precisely because revolutionary new tools for the analysis and study of languages have been developed, precisely because American scholars are leading the world in the study of such areas as Asia, Africa and Latin America, precisely because splendid new techniques are being introduced into such fields as musicology, literature and the history of art, it is now more important than ever that basic research be supported on a large scale, that scholarly communication be improved, that the publication of the results of scholarship be facilitated, and that the necessary materials and tools be made available to all serious scholars.”

**ACLS and the Humanities 50 Years On**

Fred Burkhardt’s short list frames not only the strengths of the humanities in 1964, but their achievements over the past 50 years and the work of ACLS today.

It would be easy to measure our present strength in numbers. For instance, ACLS’s annual competitions for fellowships and grants distribute more than 300 awards that carry a total of over 15 million dollars in support (about four-and-a-half times, in inflation-adjusted dollars, of the amount awarded 50 years

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13 Burkhardt. 5-6.
Each year we mobilize the efforts of approximately 600 scholars to evaluate the nearly 4,000 applications we receive, applications that are supported by 11,000 reference letters. As a reviewer for two of our competitions, I can attest, first-hand, to the qualitative strength of the field. The impressive array of research questions in the proposals, their clarity of expression, and the evident dedication to contributing to the flow of knowledge are all signs that point to the vitality of the humanities today.

The hundreds of intellectually innovative projects that ACLS supports each year help us better understand the world and ourselves. Some bring much needed historical and cultural perspective to matters of great contemporary relevance, as do the several fine projects winning awards this year that examine the complex trajectory of Russian political culture in the twentieth century or that contextualize the development of climate science in the United States and Europe. Others focus our attention on hearing and recovering voices that were long marginalized, like the proposed digital archives for black Caribbean writings of the nineteenth century and for twentieth- and twenty-first-century transgender history. A new material history of stucco charts the unassuming medium’s surprising cultural valences in early modern Italy and beyond. There are many more examples, which I encourage you to review in the recent awardees section of the ACLS website. I know you will be struck as I am by the vibrancy and importance of the research represented there.

Fred Burkhardt also pointed to America’s preeminence in the study of foreign cultures. The intellectually powerful engine of area, international, and foreign language studies built up over the twentieth century is not only a national resource, but a global one as well: scholars from around the world come to American colleges and universities to gain access to the knowledge and methods that can help interpret the history and cultural heritage of their own societies (55 percent of the materials received by the Library of Congress each year, for example, come from outside the US). This is one of the clearest instances where scholarly strength requires continued support. Yet the federal buttresses for this magnificent structure of learning—Title VI, Title VIII, and the Fulbright programs—are crumbling. It will be one of our great challenges going forward to sustain the strength so evident today.

ACLS has long advocated for scholarship without borders. Our engagement with the field of China studies is nearly 90 years old, and our programs in that field continue to expand in productive directions, in particular through our multi-pronged fellowship program funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. The African Humanities Program, which ACLS administers in Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa with the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation, has entered its second five-year cycle with an exciting new partnership between ACLS and the University of South Africa. Last year at this time, I was pleased to announce the launch of The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhist Studies. The Foundation has enabled us to create a program that is truly international in scope—scholars from around the world may apply to conduct their research anywhere in the world—and this flexibility has encouraged applicants of many nationalities to apply. I look forward to sharing the results of the first competition year of the suite of Buddhist studies programs later this month, but I can say now that the program has more than lived up to its promise of facilitating global research around a subject of transnational and broad historical importance.

The emergence over the past 50 years of new objects of study and new angles of vision—most notably an attention to peoples, social processes, objects, and places heretofore ignored—has helped prepare the humanities for the intellectual challenges of the twenty-first century. Moreover, incisive critical inquiry into the often arbitrary and contingent nature of what might previously have been taken for granted has enlarged the universe of what ought to be taken seriously.

How has this research contributed to the greater good? The historian David Hollinger provides one answer. Much humanities scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century, he writes, brought “[n]ew and sustained attention to questions of inclusion and exclusion, . . . not only the incorporation of what today are called underrepresented demographic groups,” but also consideration of “the specific fields and subfields that would be included at the expense of others, the directions taken in expanding the study of foreign cultures in relation to the study of the United States itself, and the role of the academic humanities in American public discourse.”15 This work, Hollinger explains, was propelled by the same impulses that power scientific inquiry. He notes that there is “insufficient appreciation of the social value of the risk-taking that is a necessary part of the successful operation of the human sciences. The academic humanities and social sciences in the United States have long constituted a major apparatus for bringing evidence and reasoning to domains where the rules of evidence are strongly contested and the power of reason often doubted.”16 Such risk-taking driven by reason and curiosity is something we as humanists instill in our students as the important capacity for “critical thinking.” It is one of the many arguments for the centrality of the humanities in a functioning democracy.

Besides the skills that the humanities instill in the undergraduate classroom, we also must show that the advanced study of the humanities, even at the doctoral level, prepares one for a number of possible career paths, be they inside or outside the academy. As it enters its fourth year, the ACLS Public Fellows program continues to demonstrate the broad applicability of advanced humanities training to the critical and creative engagement with major social problems. Nick Galasso, an ACLS Public Fellow placed with Oxfam America, coauthored a recent report on global wealth inequality that influenced discourse at this year’s Davos forum and that continues to garner the attention of mass media outlets like USA Today and Al Jazeera America. In the tense months leading up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia, Andrea Mazzarino, an ACLS Public Fellow working with Human Rights Watch, traveled to Moscow to release the findings of a major report on the severe challenges facing people living with disabilities in that country. Those are but two examples of the exploits of the more than 40 talented PhDs who have been selected as Public Fellows. In 2014-2015, our fellows will take on demanding roles in formulating anti-poverty policy for the federal government; in forging new partnerships among schools, hospitals, and community health organizations; and in coordinating aid relief for refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo, among many other opportunities. The diversity of organizations that partner with us for the Public Fellows program is itself a signal to the academic community and to employers everywhere that, quoting Deborah Fitzgerald again, there is a great need for the “in-depth understanding of human complexities—the political, cultural and economic realities that shape or existence—as well as fluency in the powerful forms of thinking and creativity cultivated by the humanities, arts, and social sciences.”

Learned societies play a vital public role in facilitating the publication and dissemination of the best of their members’ research. But societies also wisely recognize their responsibility to represent their disciplines to a public that every day encounters the substance of the humanities without necessarily recognizing it. Last month, I met with the board of directors of the Society for Military History, which this year will participate in “Standing Together: The Humanities and the Experience of War,” the NEH’s agency-wide initiative designed to explore various facets of military service and wartime combat in American culture. As part of the “Standing Together” program, the Society for Military History will work closely with faculty at Northeastern University to develop and promote a workshop that will train historians in digital mapping technologies and network analysis, two research methods that offer particular purchase on the study of history told in terms of battlefields, marches and mobilizations, and

16 Hollinger. 2.
shifting lines of soldiers. The combination in this program of public outreach and digital training for professional scholars shows just how pivotal societies can be in convening scholars to bring their research into productive dialogue with topics of widespread social relevance.17

Our Challenge Today

The progress of the past 50 years has vindicated Fred Burkhardt’s argument that it is the strengths and not the weaknesses of the humanities that recommend their support. But what of the next half-century? For the last five years, ACLS has convened an annual gathering of the heads of national fellowship-granting organizations in the humanities—the Guggenheim Foundation, the NEH, the National Humanities Center, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and others—to assess the state of that enterprise. All of us agree that there is a paradox to the fellowship business. One mark of the need for a fellowship program is the number of applications it attracts. Since the recession, most agencies have experienced an increase in the demand for their fellowships, and ACLS is no exception. In many of our competitions, there are 20 applicants for every available fellowship. But that very indication of the success of our program, which identifies great demand, is also a measure of unmet needs. The aggregate results from all funders spotlight a national deficit in the support of the production of knowledge.

With these concerns in mind, I am delighted to announce that at its meeting yesterday the ACLS Board of Directors approved two measures to help meet this increased demand: 1) drawing more from our endowment devoted to fellowships in order to increase the number of fellowships we award in our central, endowment-funded program from 65 to 70, with the five additional awards designated for associate professors, and 2) raising the top stipend level to $70,000 per academic year. I hope that before too long, with success in both our development efforts and the capital markets, we will be able to announce additional increases in our fellowship program, with the proximate goal of awarding 75 endowment-funded fellowships per year with top stipends of $75,000.

Our collective challenge today is different from the one confronted by Fred Burkhardt, Howard Mumford Jones, and Whitney Oates, or by their predecessors, Charles Homer Haskins and Waldo Leland, who led the ACLS in the 1920s. There is no longer one, key reigning power in higher education that needs to be convinced of the value of the humanities. Foundations and the federal government both remain important, but we all know that market forces are structuring, or transforming, the shape of our educational system. Where in the 1960s there was convergence among institutions in mission and ambition, 50 years on, there is greater stratification among and within colleges and universities. Most concerning is the growing body of research suggesting that our system of higher education is no longer a solvent for social inequality, but its glue.

Many predict that technological and economic change will “disrupt” higher education on the scale of what has happened to newspapers or record companies. Will these changes dislodge the humanities from its still new but very limited foothold in national educational priorities? Could your college go the way of the video store? To avoid that fate, colleges and universities are told to attend to their customers. But who, ultimately, are the customers? Are they students, tuition-payers, or society at large?

To address this question is to participate in the intensifying national debate about the nature of higher education in the twenty-first century. What is it to be? For whose benefit? The stakes are high. One despairs of looking to federal government, and certainly to the Supreme Court, to reverse the undeniable trend toward increasing inequality. Some private foundations, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation prominent among them, have been working to build pathways for more diverse academic generations, and we should think about what role we at ACLS might play.

If we still agree that the humanities are both an educational program and an approach to life that “centers on concern for the human individual,” then the value conferred by that educational program must be widely shared. If, as we are certain, the humanities have value, then they have value for all students, and not just the traditionally privileged classes. It takes only a quick dip into the contemporary infoscape of cable news and online media buzz to know that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not finally settle issues of race and diversity once and for all, and that the question of who we are as a nation is still an open one to many.

**Conclusion**

At the 1964 ACLS Annual Meeting, Chairman Robert Lumiansky reported to the Council that the board had been discussing “the long range financial future” of ACLS “and the desirability of obtaining endowment funds which would be large enough to insure the permanency of the Council’s basic program.” The delegate from the American Philological Association asked what effect the prospect of a national foundation for the humanities would have on those plans. The meeting’s minutes record that “Mr. Lumiansky said he thinks there will be a real place for the continuing activities of the ACLS even if we are successful in achieving federal support through a national foundation for the humanities and the arts. The two things, he thinks, go along together, rather than in any kind of opposition.”

Fifty years later, Lumiansky’s judgment has been confirmed. Both NEH and ACLS are still here, and firm partners, and we have some assurance that the ACLS will indeed have a “long range financial future.” I trust that you join me in the hope that when our successors a half-century hence look back on the record of our age, they will conclude that we helped advance the manifest intellectual vitality of the humanities, that we worked to give them the widest possible scope within all sectors of higher education as well as beyond the classroom, and that we did so without diluting their normative power and integrity.

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