On behalf of the AAU, I’d like to start by thanking the ACLS for the wonderful partnership that made this convocation possible. This convocation brings together for the first time two organizations representing the academic leadership of the humanities: the American Council of Learned Societies, which represents the scholars from all fields of humanistic study, and the Association of American Universities, which represents the nation’s leading research universities. These two groups have come together in the belief that the humanities are poised for a new period of intellectual and educational accomplishment.

In our work over the past two years that led to this important gathering, we have enjoyed a remarkable level of support both from ACLS President Pauline Yu and from former AAU President Nils Hasselmo, and I would especially like to thank Mollie Benz-Floundlacker from AAU and Steve Wheatley from ACLS for their work in organizing all our dozens of conference calls and meetings and all those drafts of our many documents. In all those conference calls, we have experienced an impressively high quality of discussion and planning for today’s meeting, from the choice of topics to the choice of discussants and presenters. Thanks to all the members of the AAU-ACLS Humanities Task Force Steering Committee for their hard work.

I’d like to explain briefly how and why this convocation came to be, and underscore that this is just one of several major initiatives that speak to the importance of the humanities – from the AAAS Humanities Initiative to the Humanities Indicator Project to some of the remarkable digital humanities programs underway to the ACLS’s new fellowship programs for younger humanities scholars. It’s important to say from the start that none of us involved views this convocation as a culmination or endpoint, but rather one of the “middle points,” with a lot more work to do – work that we hope will be informed by what happens here today.

The current process started in 2001, when the AAU Executive Committee decided that AAU members would benefit from a survey of trends and issues and best practices in the humanities, along with how the humanities are being supported at large research universities, whether the humanities are receiving appropriate emphasis, and related issues. A 19-member AAU Task Force was convened in that year, including 8 AAU presidents, and that task force ultimately produced the AAU humanities report, the full title of which was: Reinvigorating the Humanities – Enhancing Research and Education on Campus and Beyond. Like many reports issued by many associations, the report had many recommendations. Having seen many such superb documents collect much dust on many shelves, I think the most startling thing about that report is how it led to action, and this was clearly what Nils Hasselmo intended when he started this process rolling.
One of the recommendations of the report (Recommendation 10) was to convene a national summit of leaders to discuss both the internal and external challenges facing the humanities – that is: internally, how can we improve the position of the humanities on campuses and, externally, how can we make a better case for the humanities nationally. It is this latter, external agenda that accounts for why we don’t only have with us today leading scholars in the humanities from university campuses. We also have people from the media, we have the Democratic and Republican leaders of the Humanities Caucus in the U.S. Congress, along with people representing major foundations that support the humanities. I want to thank all of these people from the media, political world, foundation world and everyone else for being here. One goal for the day is, with the media present, to ask the leaders of the Congressional Humanities Caucus and the major foundations how the humanities can make their case most effectively.

In order to translate the initial report into a national action plan, AAU joined forces with ACLS, appointed a Steering Committee, and we began to reach out to campuses to seek their experience and wisdom. More than 40 AAU institutions designated a campus liaison for this initiative and at least 15 of the institutions conducted formal roundtable discussions to address the questions that had been developed. As you will learn throughout the day, we heard about a wide variety of innovative activities, including the establishment of a new humanities and social science communications office, new fundraising efforts for the humanities – including proposals for humanities labs, university professorships in the humanities, and much more. As we get into each panel discussion, I particularly want to encourage the campus liaisons who are in attendance to participate actively and share information about initiatives from your campuses so that everyone else can take these ideas back home with them. These campus liaisons have also put in a lot of effort over the past year and a half, and I want to thank them for their valuable service.

What we learned through all this effort is that, in many important ways, the humanities are extremely strong – even to the point of our wondering if we have an inappropriate title for this convocation, since the humanities are quite vigorous (and don’t need “reinvigorating”) when it comes to the highest standards of scholarship, knowledge creation and teaching. But it became very clear that the humanities do need reinvigorating in a big way when it comes to funding, when it comes to new ways of harnessing information technology for new kinds of research and new collaborative paradigms for that research, and in communicating a more coherent message so that the humanities might gain more visibility, public support, prestige, and funding both within the university and society at large.

While dozens of important issues were raised during all the roundtables, I believe all of them have three dimensions:

1. Questions about the purpose of the humanities,
2. Issues of communication, and
3. Structures of support.
I will say just a few words about each of these to get us warmed up for our panelists throughout the day.

First: notwithstanding the excellence of so much scholarship in the humanities, there is no robust agreement on their purpose. The first question we asked each roundtable to address was the question of why the academic humanities do or should matter to the university and to the larger public. A remarkable number of faculty outside the humanities horrified their humanities colleagues by expressing their clear understanding that the humanities are important because they can provide answers to questions of meaning and value and provide the context for moral judgments about how to make a life. We saw many of the humanities scholars painstakingly explaining to their engineering colleagues that their scholarship in the humanities typically doesn’t construct a handy-dandy system of meaning and values to live by, but rather informs us how such constructions are ideologically vested, culturally biased, or unstable in some other way. Indeed, by revealing the complexity in what initially might seem simple, their goal is often to provide a context in which people might learn to live with ambiguity.

Individual scholars often have answers for what they perceive to be false dichotomies between whether the humanities communicate value or critique value, whether they explain or make more complex, whether they yield deeper sensibilities only or also provide a practical utility. But these questions, as well as questions about how knowledge of the past should benefit citizens today and tomorrow and how the purposes of the humanities will be affected by the digital age are all questions that the community of the humanities has not provided an answer for in a way that can be communicated effectively to external constituencies.

And that brings me to the second dimension, which is communication. I hope that we will spend some discussion time today – in the context of each panel – talking about how we can communicate the content and vitality of the humanities to our colleagues on campus, to potential funders, and to the wider public on whose respect the enterprise ultimately depends. One conclusion that came in from the Cornell roundtable was that if there is a crisis in the humanities, it is not a crisis in the humanities per se as much as in the failure effectively to communicate the relevance of the humanities in the public sphere. Imagine if our legislators took full advantage of the wealth of humanities scholarship that might inform their policy making! I can tell you that in the U.K., Parliament now includes a number of moral philosophers in the House of Lords to inform policy making, and I know that because one of them, Baroness Mary Warnock, was all set to come and speak here today until Parliament picked today to schedule debate on their stem cell research policy, and she said she had to be there, since her job was to ensure the discussion is based on full understanding of both the scientific and the moral issues (and she contrasted this with what she called the U.S. Congress’s more “ideological” approach to such issues).

The communication problem is not just external but also internal. The very process of trying to constitute all these roundtables showed how communication between the president’s office, the provost, dean, humanities center, departments, and faculty was
itself not without friction. We clearly need to improve the efficiency of the internal nervous system of the humanities, both on campus and across the country. The AAU task force report and the roundtables produced many “best practices” and promising experiments that can improve communication, but this communication challenge is obviously not helped by the first dimension I discussed concerning the inherent complexity and difficulty of the issues that form the subject matter of the humanities.

I want to share one quotation, which captures this well:

“It is said that since the invention of [a certain modern technology] we live in a new era, an era so different from all preceding ages that the cultural tradition is no longer relevant, is in fact misleading. I submit to you that this is a rationalization, that this is a pretended reason for the educational void which we now call education. The real reason, I venture to suggest, is that we reject the religious and classical heritage, first, because to master it requires more effort than we are willing to compel ourselves to make, and, second, because it creates issues that are too deep to be faced with equanimity. We have abolished the old curriculum because we are afraid of it, afraid to face any longer in a modern democratic society the severe discipline and the deep, disconcerting issues of the nature of the universe, and of man’s place in it and of his destiny.”

The “certain modern technology” I mentioned was the invention of the steam engine. This was published by Walter Lippmann in *The American Scholar* in 1941.

The third and final dimension is the problem of structures of support for the humanities, and this starts with money but is not limited to money. At Case Western Reserve University over the last four years we’ve pumped millions of extra dollars into the humanities, but I think some of the other structures put into place by Tim Beal, Professor of Religion and Director of the Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities, had at least as much impact, from something as simple as designating one of our nicest conference rooms to be used only for multidisciplinary humanities conferences, to our annual humanities week, which has become a major event in the academic calendar with an interdisciplinary theme each year (such as “Childhood” or “Homelands and Security”), and ultimately the launch of our Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence, catalyzed by a $10 million gift from the Inamori Foundation in Kyoto, Japan. But at Case we’re struggling like everyone else with crazy visa issues for graduate students, new ways to nurture younger scholars and sustain their careers, and I know the learned societies are facing a similar set of questions about how to adapt their priorities to changing patterns of faculty careers and the need for public outreach.

I’m here today because I believe the stakes are high. I’ll never forget a comment that Shirley Kenney, President of SUNY Stony Brook, made at our AAU meeting around the first anniversary of 9/11 when we were working on the humanities task force report. She said that she thought 9/11 proves the error of the belief since Sputnik that we have to give science and technology priority over the humanities because this will improve our global society. She said 9/11 reminds us that the biggest issues facing our world are still
the “high concept, low tech” issues. The stakes are also higher than ever to garner more support for the humanities both externally with the public and internally within the university because all of the political and economic pressures that are mounting in American higher education (including issues such as accessibility, accountability, and affordability) are going to squeeze those fields the most that have weaker public support. That is simply a reality.

In this time of accelerating technological, social, economic, and political change, we need more than ever before the kinds of knowledge and new ways of thinking that only the humanities can provide.

So, we have several goals for this historic convocation. We need to prepare ourselves to make the strongest possible case for the humanities to our university colleagues and to the publics on which we depend. We need to attend to the structures within the university and within society that provide the platforms for building humanistic knowledge and for exercising humanistic interpretation and understanding. We need to identify funding gaps and possible solutions – identify new funding partnerships with foundations, for example – identify new ways to communicate the importance of the humanities in Washington, and I hope we’ll have a lot of opportunity to share successful campus initiatives that can be replicated across the country.

As I said, this convocation is not meant to be the end of a process, but the start of the next wave of action. We have asked each of our speakers and I ask all of you to focus during our time together on ideas that can advance a shared agenda for strengthening the infrastructure of the humanities on campuses and beyond. Thanks again to everyone who made this convocation possible!