AAU-ACLS Humanities Convocation

Closing Summary by Edward M. Hundert, M.D.
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It is now my daunting task to try to summarize some of the main lessons we have learned from today’s incredible set of presentations and discussions. I will take them in the order in which they were presented, and provide just a few of the “take-aways” that I hope can be carried back to all the campuses represented by the hundreds of people who have shared in this remarkable event.

We started with “Humanistic Learning and Citizenship in a Global World” and the reminder from Don Randall (President, University of Chicago and President-Elect, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation) that in many ways we ultimately need to “overcome the nineteenth century German university”. That university structure emerged out of an essentially Kantian formulation of the universe – arguably philosophy’s most brilliant hypothesis of how the natural world, the social world and the human mind are organized. Indeed, one of the triumphs of that philosophy is that it established an organization of disciplines, departments, and schools whose research productivity has been so vast and successful that we now know enough about the natural, social, and mental worlds to understand that they conform to none of the cleavages represented by those disciplines, departments, and schools.

The answer, of course, is not necessarily the wholesale restructuring of our departmental structures, since these continue to perform indispensable roles in providing mentorship, doctoral preparation, peer review, and the like. We did hear some creative solutions today, however: from President Randall’s experience with the “committees” at the University of Chicago to the “programs” at Cornell, each of which can fluidly combine faculty from different disciplines to create opportunities for research and teaching and even grant degrees, only to dissolve again if that combination of fields is not in demand by other scholars. We also heard one comment during discussion from the Dean from Northwestern who described an interesting structural experiment to decouple graduate student education from departments altogether, and I hope that he has the complete support of his Provost and President and that they in turn have the complete support of their Board, since that is the kind of support needed from the top to give such bold experiments the best chances of success. At Case, our college of Arts and Sciences has launched a Department of Cognitive Science that is intentionally meant to have the vast majority of secondary appointments, and our Dean describes such efforts not as “multidisciplinary” but as “transdisciplinary” – efforts designed to create the disciplines of the future that will ultimately recast the nineteenth century German paradigm.

Tom Mallon (Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities) then followed with his important advice about our need to be more sensitive to the different perspectives of different audiences as we try to communicate more effectively
about the humanities. (At one of our roundtables at Case, one student made the
humorous comment that we perhaps need opposite messages for our internal and external
audiences, telling the internal audiences how the humanities add complexity and
ambiguity to matters that may appear simple while telling the external audiences that if
they just give us more funding, we’ll tell them the true meaning of life!) This reminds
me of Mark Twain’s famous insight: “To be good is noble; to teach others to be good is
nobler – and less trouble!”

Dr. Mallon also made an interesting comment about the importance of connecting
to the public schools, which ultimately would be as good for us in the academy as it
would be for the public, and this was echoed by President Randall’s further comments
about the benefits to both scholars and students of teaching freshmen. I would only add
that if we are to ask our faculty, especially our young faculty, to take on these important
service roles in public schools and introductory courses that we have to include this in
our tenure evaluations. To encourage (or require) this work and then not consider it a
positive for tenure is the kind of hypocritical mixed message that breeds well deserved
cynicism.

The next session on “Reading and Knowing in the Information Age” began with
Paul Courant (Professor of Economics and Public Policy and former Provost, University
of Michigan) telling us his personal account of deciding to choose economics over the
humanities because the humanities struck him as much too difficult. This reminds me of
one of the ironies that came out at a couple of our roundtables at Case, where non-
humanities majors similarly expressed their feelings of intimidation by the rigors and
workload of their humanities major classmates, while the humanities majors themselves
reported a belief that these other students perceive them as taking some easier course of
study than the “hard sciences”.

Dr. Courant focused on the complex issues of intellectual property and copyright,
and this is clearly going to be a defining issue for the humanities. He framed the question
starkly in terms of who will ultimately own the data of this scholarship: the non-profit
world or the for-profit world. He urged us to promote aggressively the policy that any
scholarly use should be considered “fair use.” I had a remarkable opportunity to see how
these issues play out as one of the speakers at this year’s Nobel Colloquium in Stockholm
last December. One of the other speakers was Menachim Magador, the President of
Hebrew University in Jerusalem. They started a digital project to put every known map
of the Holy City on the web, and immediately issues arose not only of priority and
ownership, but even what counts as legitimate map (one early sixteenth century drawing
by a German tourist labels the Dome of the Rock as “King Solomon’s Temple, and some
feel it shouldn’t be included in the collection!).

Jim O’Donnell (Provost of Georgetown University and ACLS Delegate for the
American Philological Association) then discussed these issues in light of the current
culture wars, taking a stance against the notion that we have a duty to provide “balance.”
I would echo this and encourage all of us to remember that one important principle of the
academy is that we don’t take political positions, and the notion of “balance” is just such
a political position. Thus, when someone suggests that we have to teach “intelligent design” along with evolution to provide “balance,” we should reply that we don’t believe we have to invite Holocaust-deniers into our European History classes nor do we invite members of the Flat Earth Society into our astronomy classes – because we don’t take any political positions such as some imagined principle of “balance” is meant to require. Dr. O’Donnell also made the very interesting suggestion that universities ought to become the world’s consulting firms, and he concurred with the earlier panel that doing so would require us to be more sensitive to our audiences (including and especially our students!).

Our luncheon address by the two leaders of the Congressional Humanities Caucus was clearly a highlight for all of us, as James Leach (R-IA) and David Price (D-NC) discussed “The Public Sphere of the Humanities.” Congressman Leach led with the radical idea that national policy would be better informed if politicians only considered the lessons from Greek mythology to Hannah Arendt and everything in between. His practical advice was that the humanities faculty must get their perspectives into the popular press – that a historian or classicist writing an op-ed on the many times a strategy like invading Iraq has failed from ancient to modern times might have more impact than we expect. Ladies and gentlemen assembled here: this is a direct charge to you from the United States Congress: you need to start writing these op-eds!

Congressman Price then talked about the efforts of the Humanities Caucus to get more appropriations for the NEH and other endeavors. We should all be very grateful to him for these efforts, but I would editorialize that in light of the national budget, these heroic efforts to get an additional $14 million (with an “M”) appropriated to maintain rather than close the agency that preserves the historical record of the United States is a truly pathetic commentary on our nation. But he did ask us all to contact our congressional representatives to push to reinstate that appropriation, so please take that as another direct order from Congress! Seriously, one of the real lessons of both those talks is that we can have more impact than we think, and we need to write our members of Congress about increasing support for these issues – if we don’t, we have no business complaining we don’t get enough support.

For me, one of the highlights of the entire convocation was Congressman Leach’s response to the question from the head of the Latin American Studies Association. When she described the possibility of moving their national meeting from Boston to Montreal so that scholars from Cuba and Latin America could attend who were being denied U.S. visas, he said that if any of us are having trouble bringing humanities scholars to our campuses for this reason, we should contact him and he will engage the 71 members of the Humanities Caucus to lobby the State Department to get these scholars their visas. This is the kind of practical outcome that this unique gathering was meant to inspire. If any of you has this trouble in bringing in a scholar and you take these Congressmen up on their offer and it results in a visa for that scholar who can now come to one of our campuses, I want you to email and tell me, because even one such case would for me make the two years of work that led up to this convocation worthwhile.
In the postprandial session on “Presidential and Scholarly Leadership in the Humanities,” David Skorton (President, University of Iowa and President-elect, Cornell University) started his talk with the most obvious pronouncement: that as leaders of universities, we need to commit both money and share of mind to the humanities. He talked about the fact that this has both real and symbolic importance. I know that the week before I was inaugurated as President of Case Western Reserve University, the Cleveland Foundation gave me a $3 million “initiative fund” to invest in anything I wanted. When I stood up at the inauguration and said I was going to give it all to the College of Arts and Sciences for the humanities, that had both a real effect but also a symbolic effect, particular at a university with such a technological and biomedical emphasis historically.

President Skorton identified several other very practical and symbolic leadership moves, from the appointment of a Vice President for Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences to the use of the “bully pulpit” to declare a “year of arts and humanities.” At Iowa, they started a set of faculty-initiated grants to faculty (like a mini-internal-RFP for humanities scholarship), and they also made the humanities a philanthropic priority. I believe there is much more funding available than people realize, and institutions don’t access this money mainly because they don’t seek it out. (I’d note that from the Case perspective, we have with me here in Philadelphia not only Tim Beal, who I mentioned earlier as the Director of our Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities, but also Marty Gibbons, who handles foundation relations for our Office of Development because of all the foundation representatives attending today -- and if anyone here from any of the foundations hasn’t met Marty yet, it’s still not too late!).

The next talk was by David Marshall (Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts, UC Santa Barbara), and he articulated so eloquently the belief many of us have that academic administration can be experienced as an intellectual/creative endeavor, in contrast to some kind of bureaucratic view. My own mentor, Dan Federman always used to say that he went into academic administration for the same reasons he went into research, because of the opportunities to apply one’s creativity toward the goal of having a positive impact on people and the world.

Dean Marshall provided a “dean’s eye view” of the need to attend carefully to “foreign relations” between department and various interdisciplinary programs, centers, etc. He offered several “best practices” from which we can all learn. First: if you want more collaboration, don’t just talk about it; create incentives that reward it! Second, he encouraged the creative, judicious use of joint appointments. Third, he emphasized the proper use of language when promoting interdisciplinary efforts – thus, we should give “credit,” not “relief,” for doing this interdisciplinary work. This is a great point, and I might editorialize that the humanities are expert on issues of meaning – I’ve always wondered what it means to our students when permission not to teach them is called “relief!” Fourth and finally, he described an innovative humanities lab initiative designed to link research and education (in the way these become linked naturally in science labs) and he stressed how the education mission enriches the research mission just as is true of the opposite. I believe it is important to emphasize the humanities both as the core of a
liberal education and as areas of important scholarship in their own right. Both are called out in Case’s mission statement, for example. We all have to look for synergies between the two wherever possible, but when it’s not possible we obviously need both independently if we are to call ourselves “research universities.”

Nicola Courtright (Professor of Fine Arts, Amherst College and President-Elect/ACLS Delegate for the College Art Association) concluded that session by raising the issue of the adverse impact of “no child left behind” (often called the “no child left untested”) where most of the humanities are being crowded out very early in the rush to prepare students for standardized math and reading tests. Most of her talk emphasized three practical suggestions she made for the role of learned societies, and with most of the learned societies in the humanities represented here, I hope you will all write these down and take them back with you:

1. Continue to assert positively the values of the arts and humanities. Don’t always focus on the negative (eg, not just why censorship is bad, but why free expression is good).
2. Get serious about advocacy efforts. She discussed the hiring of PR firms, getting lawyers to write briefs to represent our side in intellectual property cases, etc. She emphasized the importance of ramping up these efforts so that we can shape the future and not continue to act as if these advocacy efforts are beneath us as we complain that our perspective isn’t being heard.
3. Combat the label of elitism by draining the moat, letting down the drawbridge of the ivory tower and welcoming in the media, the politicians, and other agencies (as we’ve tried to model in the way this convocation was organized).

In the final formal panel on “Making the Humanities Count,” AAAS President Patricia Meyer Spacks introduced Norman Bradburn (Senior Fellow at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago) to discuss his work as Co-Chair of the Humanities Indicator Project of the AAAS. He emphasized that there are in fact many things that can be counted, and this should help decision makers, so long as we all understand that not everything important can be counted and we’re careful not to make decisions based only on what is measurable. Given the observation I mentioned earlier from Shirley Kenney concerning the post-9/11 world, it would, for example, be important to know whether over the 10 years following that tragedy we are or are not awarding more PhDs in Middle Eastern Studies. We will only know if we count them.

The convocation ended with our two junior faculty members’ observations about the need to break down boundaries. Beth Wenger (Associate Professor, University of Pennsylvania) talked about the way they have connected Jewish History studies at Penn with Philadelphia’s Jewish History Museum. I recently heard an interesting talk by Richard Florida of Carnegie-Mellon, who showed data that most education in the arts and humanities in this country happens in museums and other cultural institutions, not in classrooms at all. As America ages and lifelong learning manifests in these new ways, it
will indeed require new connections between universities and museums, churches, and the like to do our job effectively. David Schaberg (Associate Professor, UCLA) echoed this with observations about the need for new kinds of faculty development for younger faculty in a more entrepreneurial age, to learn things like grantsmanship and business principles for academic leaders interested in forging these new relationships with other institutions.

I was pleased that we ended on this note, since this is the dominant strategy at Case. Over a century ago, when all of Cleveland’s cultural institutions were being built, they were all constructed on the Case campus, rather than in the downtown district as in most cities. If you look at an “ownership map” of the campus, it looks like Swiss cheese, with the “holes” being the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Natural History Museum, the Botanic Gardens, the Cleveland Institute of Art, the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Western Reserve Historical Society, and the two largest hospitals in the region. They say geography is destiny, and so it’s no accident that our art history program produces so many museum curators: it’s in the Cleveland Museum of Art. When most of the curators at the Natural History Museum teach anthropology at the university, and the virtuoso musicians in the orchestra teach music, a lot of energy gets created and a lot of new opportunities for teaching, scholarship and service are created.

Our time is at an end, and I want to thank everyone once again for participating in this convocation, which exceeded our high expectations! We are looking forward to working with other national organizations as we move into the future – not just AAU and ACLS, but with the National Humanities Alliance, the Federation of State Humanities Councils, the Modern Language Association of America, and many others. I want once again to thank President Yu of the ACLS for being such a wonderful partner in this initiative, and also thank Mollie Benz-Floundlacker of AAU and Steve Wheatley of ACLS for their incredible work behind and in front of “the scenes” that made it all happen. We are adjourned!