

## **COVID-19 and the Key Role of the Humanities and Social Sciences in the United States**

Consider the spread of COVID-19, global environmental degradation, and the deep divisions around race in this country. Our collective responses to these and other challenges arise from understanding human behavior, the stories and beliefs that guide us, the cultures and values that we build and share, and the visionary aspirations of thinkers past and present. “Where there is no vision,” James Baldwin wrote, drawing from the book of Proverbs, “the people perish.”

At this critical moment in history, humanistic knowledge – the study of languages, history, culture, the arts, anthropology, archaeology, communication, philosophy, political science, psychology, religious studies, rhetoric, sociology, regional studies, and interdisciplinary areas – is crucial to envisioning and realizing a better future for the world. For this reason, we believe that humanistic education and scholarship must remain central to campus communities and conversations.

On behalf of the thousands of students, faculty, and members of scholarly societies devoted to the study of humanity, we call on all leaders of institutions of higher education to uphold the central importance of the humanities and the social sciences as you make important decisions that will shape the institutions under your stewardship for years and perhaps generations to come.

This is a time for institutions to explore new modes of organization that facilitate innovation while maintaining the integrity of a diverse range of academic disciplines, and to do so with a full embrace of American higher education’s tradition of shared governance.

COVID-19 and its economic consequences are placing immense pressures on college and university budgets across the United States. Preparing for decreases in tuition revenue or state funding or both, many institutions have announced freezes on hiring, reductions in numbers of contract and adjunct faculty, and cuts in funding for research. Some are considering eliminating entire departments and programs.

We respect the autonomy of every institution of higher learning and the good-faith efforts of administrators forced to make difficult decisions in historically unprecedented conditions of uncertainty and financial shock. With that respect must come an urgent reminder of the vital contribution made by the humanities and social sciences to the public good – a keystone of charters and mission statements adopted by colleges and universities across the country.

Humanistic study in American colleges and universities provides communal contexts in which students, increasingly diverse in background and experience, learn together about human reasoning, beliefs, and aspirations, social and political systems, and acts of creative expression produced across centuries and around the world. Humanistic study compels us to wrestle with complex questions, with difference and conflict as well as similarity. It furnishes us with diverse visions of the world and encourages us to refuse to take things for granted – capacities necessary to sustain a just and democratic society.

Humanistic education provides not only skills for democratic life, but also skills sought by employers, such as the analysis of conflicting evidence, complex problem-solving, clear communication, and the ability to judge matters in cultural and interpersonal context.

As stewards of humanistic scholarship, we are in a position to share our knowledge of our fields, their condition, current directions, and value to students and to global society. To sustain the centrality of humanistic studies in one of our nation’s greatest assets – our private and public system of higher education – we offer our support to colleges and universities seeking the best path forward in difficult times.

Joy Connolly  
President  
American Council of Learned  
Societies

William C. Kirby  
Chair, Board of Directors  
American Council of Learned  
Societies

Robert D. Newman  
President and Director  
National Humanities Center

Richard Ekman  
President  
Council of Independent  
Colleges

Erica Kohl-Arenas  
Faculty Director  
Imagining America

David Oxtoby  
President  
American Academy of Arts  
and Sciences

Sara Guyer  
President  
Consortium of Humanities  
Centers and Institutes

Anthony W. Marx  
President  
The New York Public Library

Lynn Pasquerella  
President  
Association of American  
Colleges and Universities

Robert M. Hauser  
Executive Officer  
American Philosophical  
Society

Mary Miller  
Director  
Getty Research Institute

David Scobey  
Director  
Bringing Theory to Practice

Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action

Association of Research Libraries

Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University

Center for Research Libraries

Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library

Federation of State Humanities Councils

Institute for Advanced Study

National Humanities Alliance  
The Phi Beta Kappa Society

Social Science Research Council

The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens

University of Connecticut Humanities Institute

---

African Studies Association

American Academy of Religion

American Anthropological Association

American Association of Geographers

American Association of Italian Studies

American Folklore Society

American Historical Association

American Journalism Historians Association

American Oriental Society  
American Philosophical Association

American Political Science Association

American Schools of Oriental Research

American Society for Aesthetics

American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies

American Society for Environmental History

American Society for Theatre Research

American Society of Comparative Law

American Sociological Association

American Studies Association

Aphra Behn Society

Archaeological Institute of America

Association for Asian Studies

Association for Jewish Studies

Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies

Berkshire Conference of Women Historians

Burney Society of North America

College Art Association

College Forum of the National Council of Teachers of English

Daniel Defoe Society

Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society  
German Studies Association

Hispanic Society of America

Immigration and Ethnic History Society

International Center of Medieval Art

Latin American Studies Association

Linguistic Society of America	Organization of American Historians	Society for Eighteenth-Century Music
Medieval Academy of America	Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association	Society for Ethnomusicology
Middle East Studies Association of North America	Renaissance Society of America	Society for French Historical Studies
Midwest American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies	Rhetoric Society of America	Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era
Midwest Modern Language Association	Samuel Johnson Society of the West	Society for the Study of Early Modern Women and Gender
Modern Language Association of America	Shakespeare Association of America	Society of Architectural Historians
National Communication Association	Sixteenth Century Society and Conference	Society of Biblical Literature
National Council on Public History	Society for American City and Regional Planning History	South Atlantic Modern Language Association
North American British Music Studies Association	Society for Cinema and Media Studies	Southeast American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
North American Kant Society	Society for Classical Studies	World History Association
	Society for Eighteenth-Century French Studies	

*Signatories as of August 23, 2020*