

# Report of the Presidential Humanities Commission

## Executive Summary

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## The Mission of the Presidential Commission

The Presidential Commission on the Humanities was assigned to help the University of California formulate its "twenty-first century role as a national and international model for the humanities in higher education."

We grounded our work in the belief that no university can be truly great without a rich and multifaceted environment for the humanities, an environment that embraces the past and envisions the future. On the one hand, the humanities preserve our capability to study remote or ancient cultures and languages, although these may be of interest to only a handful of people. On the other hand, they offer an opportunity to understand the grand migrations of peoples and customs that shaped the contemporary world and are building its future as we watch.

The humanities connect the past to the future, the far away to the close at hand. Through the humanities, Dante's *Commedia* and Shakespeare's plays inhabit the same classroom that is wired to the Internet. They give Sanskrit religious texts and Greek philosophy and ancient Chinese poetry a place at the seminar table alongside the diverse literatures of the hybrid cultures that make up the Americas today. The humanities allow us to see not only what a culture is but also how it changes. We can follow the development of literature in Spanish or music in central Europe; we can see how writers of the modern Francophone diaspora in Africa reshape the French language to suit their voices, how new immigrants express the cultural perspectives of Asia as they engage with the American experience. The humanities make the here and now feel more alive, less routine and automatic, precisely because they force us to reflect upon the present moment in the light of other times and places that may be both radically different and eerily familiar at the same time.

The University of California has long understood the essential role played by the humanities in educating students and building the knowledge base for future scholars. On its several campuses, UC offers a large array of excellent established programs in the traditional departments of humanities: history, philosophy, literary and language studies, classics, art history, and others. We have distinguished faculty in these areas of study and outstanding programs of research and teaching. Nineteen of our doctoral programs in the humanities are in the top 10 nationally.

However, the Presidential Commission asks UC to do more than sustain its historical efforts in this area; we believe the university has an obligation to make them thrive. Eager to face the challenges that confront traditional understandings of their disciplines, our socially engaged faculty are already remapping the traditional subject matters of the humanities and producing new objects of study. We urge UC to support this effort by providing new resources to release the

energy that will help us draw from the humanities the knowledge and skills required to meet the challenges of the present.

One pressing challenge facing UC and the humanities is the changing demographics of the state of California, which indicate that the state has become an international community in its diversity. The University of California itself is a global institution. Thus, the curriculum of the University of California must engage the intellectual questions that emerge from this diversity. Our graduates will need a sense of what it means to be human as they respond to the realities of a global economy, a global technology, and an emergent global culture. Through centuries of experience both defining the particularities of cultures and revealing their commonalities, the humanities have much to contribute to this task. They can help all members of the university community, but especially students, learn how to negotiate our culturally diverse contemporary world in ways that are both knowledgeable and sensitive.

The humanities have a special role to play in helping students keep their balance amid the social and technological changes sweeping through our society. As students envision the ideals that will shape their own lives, the humanities provide **(1) an appreciation of the major accomplishments and limitations of distinctive cultural traditions, present and past; (2) a foundation for participation in our culturally diverse contemporary world; and (3) the ability to assess various questions of value and ethics and find meaningful answers.** As social and technological change presents both problems and opportunities, the humanities help us analyze concrete human problems and project imaginative new strategies to engage them. They provide conceptual and analytic tools for thinking about who we are, where we live, how we ought to live.

In our report, we set forth a range of recommendations that we believe will allow UC to provide leadership and promote excellence in the humanities. The report has four main sections, **New Literacies, Research, Graduate Support and Employment, and Outreach.** In the **New Literacies** section, we provide a framework for considering the importance of the humanities in undergraduate education and in the public sphere, emphasizing the crucial contribution that humanities make to UC's role in imagining and preparing for the state's and the nation's future. In the **Research** section, we propose several strategies to stimulate and support humanities research, both individual and collaborative. Having identified graduate students as a crucial element in UC's humanities enterprise, we outline ways to enhance the quality of their education under **Graduate Support and Employment.** The **Outreach** section shows how humanities can create the metaphorical warm, firm handshake as UC extends its arms to the California community. Finally, we have included a coda describing a bold new initiative to address the "new societies and new technologies" described in the "New Literacies" section of the report. This coda will be developed into a proposal, on behalf of the humanities in the UC system, addressed to a major foundation. We hope that this initiative will also meet with

interest on the part of the legislature and governor when the economy rebounds at a future date.

Although we have separated these topics to present our recommendations in related groupings, a number of threads connect them. The first has already been mentioned: Humanities can be the keystone in UC's efforts to provide an intellectual framework for the state's and the university's established diversity. Second, although the traditional model of scholarship in the humanities has been single scholars working independently, researchers in the humanities are increasingly collaborating across the boundaries of traditional disciplines. They are also collaborating across campus boundaries, a third common theme in our report, and this is a trend we feel deserves support. The boundaries that have traditionally divided one campus from the other continue to function effectively as administrative structures. However, our educational mission might be better served if we share the scholarly resources and knowledge pools we have built individually. Looking to that collaborative model, we have drawn several of our recommendations from programs already in place, with proven records, at various UC campuses.

Our report provides a series of recommendations that build on the excellent structures created by the first **Humanities Initiative** while also offering imaginative new ways to address the changing configuration of knowledge in the 21st century. Each section features discussion of issues and concerns, followed by specific proposals, some of them requiring administrative facilitation only, others requiring new funds. To remain competitive in securing the best faculty and the best graduate students for our humanities programs, we will need additional financial resources. As the charge to our commission suggests, our past efforts to maintain and enhance the quality of humanities in the UC system have been compromised by a lack of resources, including a budget that would allow us to compete with the best public and private institutions.

## PRIORITIES FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Graduate students are in many ways at the heart of the enterprise in a research university. They are mentioned often in this report, both in their own section, and in the research and outreach goals we recommend. Therefore, **our top priority is a dramatic increase in fellowship funding for graduate students.** This is a crucial requirement if we are to maintain and build on the excellence of the humanities at UC. We will work in tandem with the UC Commission on the Growth and Support of Graduate Education to implement our recommendations. Another immediate priority is **to buttress existing systemwide and campus structures**, many of which came into existence with the first Humanities Initiative, including the Humanities Research Institute, campus-based humanities centers, and fellowship programs for graduate students and faculty. Additionally, we seek **to expand research opportunities for faculty in ways that will enhance both undergraduate and graduate education.** We describe several

new initiatives that we believe will further this goal. Finally, with an eye toward the future of our state and of the student bodies at our universities, we propose **expanded programs of outreach to the communities that surround the campuses of the UC**. We focus in particular on the high schools that produce future university applicants and on the young people, who by virtue of their sociodemographic background, might benefit most from a UC education.

Our recommendations attempt to address responsibly our compact with the legislature that provides for support of a world-class research mission and promises, in turn, that the University of California will take seriously its commitment to the diverse communities of California. We believe these proposals will strengthen the University at the same time that they invigorate the humanities. We commend them to your attention.

The Humanities Commission gratefully acknowledges the assistance of a number of UCOP staff who supported the work of the Commission and provided key data throughout the report. Our thanks go to Dante Noto, Kate Jeffery, James Litrownik, Ami Zusman, Julie Gordon, and others. We also acknowledge the important contributions to this effort by Candice Garretson and Steven Akiyama from UC Irvine.