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Report to the Council

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Now that I'm approaching the end of my second year as president of the ACLS, I've been reminded in a timely way of one of Emily Dickinson's poems:

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.
I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch—
This gave me that Precarious Gait
Some call Experience.

While I don't claim even to have mastered that "Precarious Gait" yet, I'd like to thank all of you who have helped to keep me upright as I've stepped from "Plank to Plank" over the past two years—the superb staff at ACLS, my colleagues on the Board, and all of you here today. I'd also like to note that my memory jog occurred in a New York City subway train, where the MTA has embarked on a program to put Poetry in Motion. This suggests, at the least, that the humanities does in fact have a public, a topic our afternoon panel today will surely engage.

This session is my opportunity to report to the Council, to the representatives of our Associate institutions, and to the community of friends gathered here on what ACLS is doing and why we are doing it. I am tempted to think that the previous panel, by providing such splendid examples of innovative scholarship supported by ACLS, has already done my task for me. "Advancing humanistic studies in all fields of learning" is the first mandate of our mission, but we should never lose sight of the fact that it is individual scholars who advance scholarship; ACLS does so by supporting individuals. But, as we so often stress, the value of our support cannot be measured in terms of cash outlays alone, but in relation to the community of judgment we convene, the debates they have, and the choices they make in allocating that cash.

It is the question of "community" that lies at the junction between this morning's and this afternoon's special sessions; between the work of advancing humanistic scholarship and the question of connecting that work with the wider communities of different publics. ACLS stands for peer-review. If there are "peers," there must be an assumed community. As scholars, we

advance claims for the autonomy and self-governance of our community. Our community is broad, diverse, and constantly changing, but it is in one sense a gated community: we argue that we must define who our peers are. That is the issue that is at the core of the so-called debates about the so-called “academic bill of rights” proposed by David Horowitz. That proposal aside (which I hope is where it stays), the public has, by and large and up to now, agreed to, or at least accepted, a sphere of scholarly self-government. Is that the end of the transaction? What return does the public receive on its “investment”—both financial and moral—in the autonomy of the scholarly community?

I suspect that our panel this afternoon will touch on that question. I would like to pursue it this morning in two steps. First, talk briefly about some current ACLS activities that concern the health of our academic communities and their relation to their publics. Second, offer some thoughts on the public value of scholarly self-governance. I certainly do want to leave time for discussion.

You have in your agenda books some materials about ACLS activities that each examine the academic humanities community in different institutional manifestations: as learned societies, in our colleges and universities, and on the digital frontier of cyberspace. Our concern in each of these areas is to understand better and strengthen where possible the communities that exist on these planes. As we do so, we realize that our conversation cannot be carried out only in these communities, but must reference the public value of their work.

“Learned Societies” is, of course, the ACLS’ “last name,” as it were. ACLS as a community, to be sure, but also, as Garrison Keillor jokes, as “an association of associations.” Our very existence is premised on the existence of a strong stratum of learned societies. You all play a distinctive role in the complex ecology of American academia. The system of higher education and research in the U.S. is characterized by a high degree of institutional diversity but also a commonality of values and ideals. Our societies, most of which combine democratic governance with the application of rigorous standards in their journals and selection of leadership, neatly balance these forces. It is worth noting in passing that the phenomenon of learned societies has not received the amount of formal academic study that their importance to the academic community suggests they should. The modest but creditable efforts of the ACLS Conference of Administrative Officers to develop some baseline data on the collective health and dynamics of societies in the 21st century—work begun for their 2001 Retreat in Boise that will continue at their 2007 Retreat in Salt Lake City—are important beginnings, but more should be done. Why we feel we must “retreat” to the vastness of the Rocky Mountains is an interesting point I cannot tarry on. (At best I can recall Confucius’ comment in his Analects to the effect that “The wise delight in water, but the humane delight in mountains.”) And more will be done, but at the moment our focus is on the institutional health of our societies. The leadership seminar we conducted last year concerned the relations of elected academic leadership to appointed administrative leadership and to the broad concerns of society members. But all these concerns are conditioned by the public role of learned societies and how that is defined. These issues can be very urgent and very practical, as is evidenced by the recent travails of those societies with meetings planned for San Francisco during labor-management struggles in the hotel industry.

You also find in your agenda books descriptions of three initiatives that concern the different institutional communities of the academic humanities: the Teagle Working Group concerned with undergraduate liberal arts education and thus with liberal arts colleges; the task force concerning comprehensive universities; and the ACLS-AAU initiative that we trust begins with research universities. Each of these projects aims to make a case for the importance of what we do as scholars and as teachers. We are moved to do this because of the very real pressures on these institutions, pressures that may originate in budgetary issues but soon come to rest on questions of mission and role. Some of that discussion must take place within these institutions. For example, the ACLS-AAU steering committee is particularly concerned about the relationship of the humanities to other disciplines on our campuses. But the larger and ever present question is how we align the sense of our mission that is so alive in our epistemic communities—in our learned societies, in the scholarly community across the disciplines—with the very real expectations of students, tuition-paying parents, and the public that ultimately supports higher education?

The same questions echo in cyberspace. The ACLS Commission on Cyberinfrastructure in the Humanities and Social Sciences has been holding public sessions around the country to hear from the scholarly community on the needs, potential rewards, and priorities for developing a more robust presence of humanistic learning on the digital frontier. There can be no question, I think, that technology can empower humanities and social science scholars in the essential elements of what they already do: gather, examine, interpret, and analyze data, texts, and images. The scholarly community has always been a virtual community, a “communications gemeinschaft,” and digitization has expanded the intensity and breadth of our communication exponentially. More importantly, as all our colleagues in media studies know, new ways of seeing bring new ways of knowing and we have only begun to explore how digital technologies can transform as well as transmit knowledge.

Our Cyberinfrastructure Commission is now drafting a report that will aim to outline what can be done to exploit this potential more systematically than we now do. Aspiring digital scholars are often in the equivalent of a pre-Gutenberg situation: if you want to get your work out, you must build your own printing press. “Cyberinfrastructure”—a term of art coming from computer sciences—can be a commonly available platform that allows scholars to focus on scholarship and, critically, present that scholarship to a much wider public. But, as with the institutionally-focused initiatives I mentioned earlier, the critical question is how and to whom to make the case for investment in this promising venture. Jim O’Donnell wisely remarked that the Commission believes that the intellectual and cultural payoff from this investment is large and that the headline for the report cannot be “English Professors Want Better Computers.” The Commission must convince both the public and the scholarly community that digital scholarship carries public value, and that, as the Commission’s Senior Editor Abby Smith writes: “We can see the possibility of placing much of the world’s cultural heritage—its historical record, its literary and artistic achievements, its languages, beliefs and practices—within the reach of nearly every citizen.”

But, unfortunately, the case for the public value of humanities scholarship, or of scholarship in general, is crowded out by more attention-grabbing dramas. We find ourselves at a moment when the most newsworthy happenings in academia are not discoveries, publications, or student

achievements, but controversy, invective, and tumult. The mere whisper of the names “Ward Churchill” or “Larry Summers” alone can denote the moment.

In the brief time remaining to me, I would like to consider with you the general question of how the stipulation of a self-governing academic community—the underpinnings of academic freedom—is a public good and not a mere charter of special privileges for scholars, but that it is contingent on a certain autonomy from public pressures.

In 2002, reacting to campus tensions echoing conflicts in the Middle East, the president and provost of the University of Chicago, Don Michael Randel, issued a statement on that university’s stance regarding civil discourse and debate, debate being an essential element of civil discourse. As President Don Randel put it:

We are a community, and this entails a decent respect for one another and even a degree of trust. No set of rules or codes of behavior can ever fully capture everything that respect and trust require. Maintaining this community is hard work, and each of us must assume some personal responsibility for it. In a world of increasing tensions and heated differences, we will sometimes be accused of bias or even rank prejudice for tolerating a wide spectrum of views. But the response to views that one finds distasteful is not in the first instance to attempt to suppress them but instead to answer them with the force of argument.¹

Specifying civility as the acknowledgement of and requirement for participation in a community of inquiry suggests how it ought to work. Civil discourse implies respect for our interlocutors as fellows in our own community. The respect we pay to our fellows’ arguments is their contestation. We respect our fellows’ arguments not just for their content but the opportunity to contest them and the mutual belief that that contestation is a value. The practice of academic civil discourse, then, acknowledges and instantiates a community with a common purpose. And the existence of that community is the basic premise of academic freedom.

We’d deceive ourselves if we didn’t recognize the fragility and vulnerability of the principle of academic freedom. As a formal doctrine, it is only a little more than a century old. Will it live to see two centuries? Many of you probably heard that former House Speaker Newt Gingrich doesn’t think it should. Outraged by the Ward Churchill case, he’s suggested that we dispense with the experience of the past century:

“You don’t need tenure in this country anyway,” Gingrich is quoted as saying by the National Review Online. ...Tenure is an artificial social construct. Tenure did not exist before the twentieth century, and we had free speech before then.”²

¹ “Provost, President make clear University’s stance on civil discourse, debate,” *The University of Chicago Chronicle*, Nov. 21, 2002, vol. 22, no. 5, <http://chronicle.uchicago.edu/021121/provost.shtml>.

² Jim Geraghty, “Newt on Terrorism, Ward Churchill at AEI,” Kerry Spot, *National Review Online*, Feb. 25, 2005, <http://www.nationalreview.com/tks/057019.html>.

This conflation of the concepts of academic freedom and free speech is common, but inaccurate. The foundational statement on academic freedom, as many of you know, is the 1915 “Report on Academic Freedom and Tenure” of the then fledgling American Association of University Professors. It reads in part:

The distinctive and important function [of professors]...is to deal at first hand, after prolonged and specialized technical training, with the sources of knowledge; and to impart the results of their own and of their fellow-specialists' investigations and reflection, both to students and the general public, without fear or favor. ...The proper fulfillment of the work of the professoriate requires that our universities shall be so free that no fair-minded person shall find any excuse for even a suspicion that the utterances of university teachers are shaped or restricted by the judgment, not of professional scholars, but of inexperienced and possibly not wholly disinterested persons outside their ranks.³

Note that this statement doesn't delineate an ambit for academic freedom that is larger than the freedom of speech compassed by the First Amendment. Indeed, its orbit is a smaller one. If all citizens have First Amendment rights, only faculty (in the AAUP's argument) possess academic freedom, which derives from values that attach to the distinct professional role of the scholar. Academic freedom doesn't grant professors the right to make libelous statements or to shout “Fire!” in a crowded theater. What the statement does seek to secure is something ordinary citizens do not enjoy, the limitation of who can sit in judgment of the “utterances of university teachers,” and that role is limited to the community of university teachers themselves. The freedom it provides is only a freedom from the judgment and sanctions of the professor's ultimate employer: the administration, the trustees, and, ultimately, the public that supports the academic enterprise through either tax dollars or tax exemption. And it is, as Robert Post has argued in a forthcoming article, less a defense of individual rights than a safeguarding of the interests constituted by the corporate body of the faculty and its commitment to professional self-regulation according to the standards of the disciplines.⁴

As most of you know, Columbia's president, Lee C. Bollinger, singled by the controversies over his University's department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures, has articulated the logic of academic freedom in no uncertain terms.⁵ He begins his recent Cardozo lecture, sponsored by the New York Bar Association, by noting this is “a time of enormous stress for colleges and universities across the country...a time of contentious debate on campuses...[that] concern matters of national or global importance. Many are joined—even incited—by outside forces, from political pressure groups to the mainstream media to increasingly strident voices on the Web.” (Indeed, an article in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* [“Facing Down the E-Maelstrom,” April 29, 2005] describes the almost crippling effect of e-mail and blog interventions in other campus debates elsewhere.)

³ American Association of University Professors, *The 1915 Report on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, as excerpted in Thomas Haskell, “Justifying the Rights of Academic Freedom,” in *The Future of Academic Freedom*, Louis Menand, editor (University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 58-9.

⁴ Robert Post, “The Structure of Academic Freedom,” draft ms, <http://www.yale.edu/ccr/post.doc>. I have drawn significantly from his discussion in these remarks.

⁵ “President Bollinger Delivers Cardozo Lecture on Academic Freedom,” *Columbia News: The Homepage of the Public Affairs Office and Its Publication, The Record*, www.columbia.edu/cu/news/05/03/cardozo_lecture.html.

Bollinger asserts that “universities...must stand firm in insisting that, when there are lines to be drawn, we must and will be the ones to do it. Not outside actors, not pressure groups, not the media. Ours is and must remain a system of self-government.” That self-governance carries a corollary obligation: “There is review, it does have consequences, and it does consider content.”⁶

It is on the basis of that review—the peer review processes that we know so well—that scholars determine who’s admitted to their community of judgment. What does the public gain in this deal? What is its interest in the intellectual autonomy of professors? Where is the public value in academic freedom? The 1915 statement of the AAUP provides at least one answer. It assumes that scholarly inquiry is best pursued in a nonproprietary environment, independent of outside interests. The best knowledge is that which is freely developed and freely judged by disciplinary authorities. While debates have raged over the decades as to how those disciplinary norms are established and, indeed, how the disciplines themselves are defined, I think it’s best if they’re kept internal to the academy. As long as the public believes in the need for freely created knowledge, it has a reason to continue to support academic freedom.

There is also, as President Bollinger argues, a political value—political in the highest sense—of insulating academic discourse from quotidian partisan politics: “There is far more at work within a university than simply the search for truth,” he notes. There is:

A significant additional function...of nurturing a very distinctive intellectual character. ...of all the qualities of mind valued in the academic community I would say the most valued is that of having the imaginative range and the mental courage to take in, to explore, the full complexity of the subject. To set aside one's pre-existing beliefs, to hold simultaneously in one's mind multiple angles of seeing things, to actually allow yourself seemingly to believe another view as you consider it—these are the kinds of intellectual qualities that...suffuse the academic atmosphere at its best.

Here President Bollinger is echoing none other than John Cardinal Newman, who saw in the university “[t]he power of viewing many things as once as a whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence.”⁷ Bollinger draws, however, an additional connection, one between the intellectual culture nurtured in the university and the “particular intellectual and emotional attributes [that] are needed to make a successful democracy,” which include “the intellectual flexibility of the give-and-take of perpetual conflict over multiple desires and beliefs that characterize life in a democratic system of government.” That is, knowing “[w]hen to share and embrace other views, when to insist on your own; when to compromise and when to resist.”⁸

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1853, 1858; New York: Doubleday and Co., 1962) p. 158. Quoted in Edward W. Said, “Identity, Authority, and Freedom,” in Menand, *The Future of Academic Freedom*, (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁸ Bollinger, Cardozo lecture.

I think that the public value of the university as a community that embraces, at least in principle, the practice of intellectual wholeness, and the ability to think beyond the interests and boundaries of the self, can only increase. It may be that we are entering a stage of our cultural development where we can customize our cultural consumption to reinforce—and never to challenge—our established intellectual commitments and political views. The proliferation and ideological segmentation of the news media accelerates each day. Technologies exist to refine our ideological preferences infinitely as the common public square shrinks to the vanishing point. Hence the importance of maintaining the university as a dynamic community of debate and judgment whose commitment to civility and scholarly self-regulation is the premise of its academic freedom.

We might also hope that our own civil discourse can provide a model for the wider civic discourse. A comment made during the recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee's consideration of the nomination of John Bolton to be U.S. ambassador to the UN brings to the fore the fragile state of our public square. The committee was moving toward what was expected to be a lock-step party-line vote on the confirmation of the nominee. Democrats asked for further hearings, arguing vehemently that, among other disqualifications, the nominee can be very uncivil when disagreed with. But the Republican committee chair seemed determined to call a vote when Republican Senator George Voinovich stated that he had heard what the Democrats had said and was himself not prepared to vote on the nomination. Senator Voinovich thus tipped the balance, and the committee adjourned to allow more investigation and hearings. The remarkable comment I want to call to your attention came from an astonished Senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island: "I don't know if I've ever seen, in a setting like this, a senator changing his mind as a result of what other senators said." Now wouldn't you have thought that it was a basic function of the members of the "world's greatest deliberative body" to debate and reason together, even to the point of changing their minds? Not exactly, it would appear, and perhaps almost never.

The modeling of civil discourse—debate that is both genuine and civil—is, I think, one aspect of the public value of academic freedom. At the same time, we in the academy must not stand aloof from the wider civic discourse. Speaking at an ACLS Annual Meeting, NYU historian Thomas Bender stated that:

To the extent that we follow a pattern of withdrawal from the public culture, we become vulnerable to those simple questions that often enrage us: *What do you do? What good is it?* We err if we respond that "it's none of your business" or that "you would not understand," which amounts to the same thing. These are fair questions, and if we cannot answer them for our neighbors in everyday language, we should be concerned.⁹

What we do, in very great part, is debate our naturally quite different views on the subjects to which we have dedicated our professional lives. Sustaining both the independence of that professional debate from outside forces and the value of what it has to say to that outside world

⁹ Thomas Bender, "Locality and Worldliness," in *The Transformation of Humanistic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: Opportunities and Perils*, ACLS Occasional Paper, No. 40, 1997, <http://www.acls.org/op40ben.htm#Bender>.

is the difficult dance the scholarly community has contracted to do. Last week, the ACLS Humanities Program in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine convened an international symposium at the New York Public Library to consider strategies for strengthening humanities scholarship in that region. Among the speakers was Tatiana Sheyhtsova of the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus. Or, to be more accurate, formerly in Minsk, since it has been closed by the dictator Lukashenko and is going into exile in Vilnius, Lithuania. She described compellingly a “so called scholarly community [that] has yet to become a community,” where academics “reproduce certain obligatory forms of scholarly activity which are considered boring and unfruitful by their own participant.” Genuine scholarly debate is a novelty, and critical review of colleagues is not accepted by many. In this situation many have been forced to hew to what she called “the golden rule of post-soviet intellectuals: ‘everyone survives [by] being alone.’”

We have come to Philadelphia not to be alone, but to attempt to represent the broad set of overlapping, and sometimes contesting, communities we represent. Our communities, too, would be alone if we failed to reflect on their connections with each other and their common role in the public sphere. But I’m confident that that’s a commitment we share, and that we’re in this together.