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Report to the Council

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**Pauline Yu
President, American Council of Learned Societies**

My report to you today will cover a number of topics, but the first, and the last, subject is gratitude. Thank you for coming to join us in Pittsburgh, about which I'll have a few more words to say a little later. But let me begin by saying how very grateful I feel, and greatly honored I am, by the confidence placed in me by my colleagues on the ACLS Board of Directors and the ACLS community as a whole in renewing my appointment as the Council's president. When I spoke to the Annual Meeting in 2003 as president-elect, your warm welcome strengthened my resolve to build upon ACLS's considerable past accomplishments while being alert to new needs and opportunities. I think it's fair to say that in the past five years we all—the ACLS, its board, its staff, our member societies, our foundation partners, our colleague organizations, and the individual scholars who populate our committees—have achieved a great deal. We have significantly increased our direct support of scholarship through fellowships and grants; we've deepened collaboration among learned societies and their leadership; we have sought to highlight the development of new methods of research and scholarly communication, especially in the digital realm, and we have worked to build a new set of international partnerships. Everything I've learned in the past five years has reinforced my conviction that ACLS plays a distinct and vital role in the academy, and therefore in public life.

Five years ago this month another president we know addressed his constituents, in a somewhat different setting, under the banner "Mission Accomplished." Ours is not. The humanities are intellectually vibrant, but under-supported by the public and undervalued even by some in the academy. We must do more to demonstrate the enduring value of our enterprise. We must grasp the opportunities presented to us by new technologies. We must challenge the barriers that impede the free flow of humanistic knowledge and scholars across borders. We must respond to the manifest need for the knowledge and understanding which humanities scholars constantly seek to refine. Why does it matter? The former president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, provides a cogent answer in *The Art of the Impossible*: "[T]he world cannot just be explained, it must be grasped and understood as well. It is not enough to impose one's own words on it: one must listen to the polyphony of often contradictory messages the world sends out

and try to penetrate their meaning.”¹ Without the humanities, we cannot listen to the polyphony of the world; we cannot penetrate its diverse meanings.

So, because I am grateful for your confidence, I will forswear premature declarations of victory. But, my friends, I remain optimistic that in the coming five years we can accomplish much to advance the humanities. As president of ACLS, I will be ready from Day One to answer the 3 a.m. call on the Red Phone with a hearty “Yes, we can!” Yes, we can accomplish more, and with your help we will do so.

The importance and the distinctiveness of the ACLS mission were underlined for me in March when I traveled to Taiwan at the invitation of the Ministry of Education. The Minister asked me to speak at the Academia Sinica and at National Cheng-chi University on how support for humanities research is structured in the United States and on the place of the humanities in American higher education. I welcomed the opportunity, knowing that the Taiwanese leadership understands that the best guarantee of a nation’s future well-being is the effectiveness of its systems of education and research.

Comparative higher education is a lively topic these days, with “convergence” of national structures and policies linked to processes of “globalization.” This convergence is by no means accidental or spontaneous. Indeed, in its 2000 report, *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*,² the Task Force on Higher Education and Society, convened by the World Bank and UNESCO, prescribed for the developing world the outline of an effective national university system that encapsulates some of the most salient features of higher education in the U.S. The Bank identified the following four dynamics of an effective system:

- that it be a mixed system in which both public and private universities are financed by both public and private sources;
- that it be a stratified system in which the component universities have different purposes and, as a consequence, different levels of prestige;
- that universities have a culture and structure of shared governance in which the public authorities, the professoriate, and the university’s leaders and managers all have a role but none is all-powerful;
- that it be a system open to market influences, so that competition for students, faculty, outside support, and prestige can engender an upward spiral of improvement and development.

The American pattern of higher education differs greatly from the state-run, top-down, *dirigiste* management of Taiwanese higher education. The scholars and academic leaders I spoke with there were curious how such a decentralized, variegated system as ours could be a system at all: how could it acquire coherence and direction? I did not think it immodest to answer their questions by pointing to the work of learned societies and ACLS. Our organizations serve as transmission belts for new ideas and approaches, and

¹ Vaclav Havel, *The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice* (New York: Fromm International, 1998) 107.

² Task Force on Higher Education and Society. *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000. 10 June 2008 <<http://www.tfhe.net>> .

as balance wheels that help maintain the system's grounding in core academic values. That assertion only provoked another question: how do learned societies—essentially voluntary organizations—develop their leadership? I know there have been moments when many of you have wondered about this yourselves, but believe me, to the outside world you've figured it out.

Their questions were important and not unfamiliar to me and my ACLS colleagues. Our core practices map to international scholarly needs, and to the widely shared desire to develop the tools of building and maintaining trans-institutional and transnational scholarly networks. The tools, in other words, of academic self-governance. Andrzej Tymowski, ACLS Director of International Programs, has been ardent in his pursuit of this aim in other corners of the world. Just last week, he was in St. Petersburg at a meeting of the new International Association of Humanists, a nascent learned society that has emerged from and been nurtured by the ACLS Humanities Program in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. That program, which has aided more than 600 scholars in those countries, will draw to a close in the next few years, but we hope that the new Association can succeed in its supportive role and sustain the community it has catalyzed. As you may recall from my report last year, we are also hoping to be asked to do the same in Africa; a proposal for such a program is now under foundation review.

The fact that ACLS and the learned societies play a vital role within our educational system doesn't mean that we can't appreciate their curiosities. As president of ACLS I've come to realize that the general public doesn't always regard us, and the work that we do, with quite the same degree of seriousness with which we in the scholarly world view ourselves. Far too many people, I fear, might simply agree with Auden's oft-cited definition of a professor as "a person who talks in someone else's sleep."

But even more scathing critiques can emerge from within the bosoms of our own families, and especially our children, for whom masses of scholars, it seems, can be absolutely terrifying. Last January, my colleague Saul Fisher, ACLS director of fellowships, sent me to the most recent *Proceedings* of the American Philosophical Association, one of our societies, to which Professor Charles Bolyard had submitted a copy of his nine-year-old son's report to his grade school class on the family's visit to the annual meeting of the Association's Eastern Division in Washington. Young Atticus Bolyard's essay on ruled paper with fourth-grade printing and orthography is reproduced—pricelessly—in the journal. Let me give you his full account:

2 days after Christmas I went to a philosophy confrence. It was horrible. There were 2,00[0] philosophers. They all did weird things. They couldn't make jokes, many had beards.

In the elvavater it was worse. Once a philosopher got off on the wrong floor, so said, "wait for me!" "We'll take you to the 27th [floor]," said another. Nobody laughed. "Get it. There are only 10 floors," he said. "Maybe go up and down a few times," said some random old guy in a country accent. You get the point it was creepy.

A few days later there was a fire. Only one person was hurt, but everyone did weird things. Like people were standing in the roads, so non-philosophers had to lead them out. Some people went back into the hotel.

Firefighters had to lead them away. Still one guy stayed and had his bags blocking the door. Firefighters told him to move his bags, so he did, but when they left he put them back. I'll never go to a philosophy conference again.³

In his defense, Professor Bolyard explains that his family chose to accompany him to the meeting despite his warnings. I don't know if Atticus Bolyard would be more comfortable in Pittsburgh today. I know he'd find many people—some even with beards—who can tell jokes here.

We'll certainly need to keep our sense of humor when we consider the policy environment of higher education today. Political leaders stress the economic role of higher education and ask how universities can enhance the international economic competitiveness of the United States and the individual competitiveness of university graduates in the labor market. The Spellings Commission Report of 2006 was categorically clear on what it saw as the university's role: "We want a higher-education system," the Commission wrote, "that gives Americans the workplace skills they need to adapt to a rapidly changing economy."⁴

As universities turn increasingly to the market, it becomes more apparent that the humanities are among the least obviously "marketable" of the university's "products." As government policymakers seek stronger regulation of university finance while asserting simplistic educational priorities, the humanities, whose principal source of funding is within the university, are likely to suffer. If we are to attract new investment, we in the humanities community will need to be ever more adroit in making the case for the importance of our work.

I think the standing of ACLS to make this case derives in large part from our constitution as a federation of learned societies. The plurality and diversity of our membership means that we represent scholars as scholars, scholars who research and teach across the whole spectrum of American higher education. My meetings with the boards and councils of our member societies help me and help ACLS articulate our agenda. By the way, I want to take this opportunity to renew my offer to meet with as many of your governing bodies as possible. Please let me or Sandra Bradley know if you have upcoming meetings you'd like me to visit; the invitation needs to come from you.

One of my greatest pleasures of the past five years has been coming to know the Conference of Administrative Officers, the executive directors of our member societies. Their work is a great engine of insight into one of the most important and distinctive features of the American intellectual landscape. This past November the CAO held a retreat in Salt Lake City focused on how learned societies shape intellectual trends and, may, in turn, be shaped by them.

³ *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 81.2 (2007): 6. The handwritten document is reproduced in the [online edition](#).

⁴ U.S. Department of Education. *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Education*. Washington, D.C., 2006, xi. Available online at < <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf> > .

The CAO's periodic retreats mark phases in the development of the learned society enterprise, and the Salt Lake City meeting's agenda book included very interesting material from earlier convocations. It is both heartening and chastening, and probably ought not be surprising, to read that our predecessors were preoccupied with the same issues that vex us today: maintaining and expanding membership; financing and organizing publications; developing public understanding of the substance of humanistic work; and—of course—worrying about budgets. A host of forces—market, technological, political, demographic—all continue to challenge the learned society enterprise. In 2001 much of the inspiration for the CAO's Boise retreat was the question of the viability of learned societies in the twenty-first century. That question, happily, received an affirmative answer as research showed that most of our societies were growing in membership and that most members joined societies not for material benefits, but out of solidarity with the intellectual and cultural project that a given society promotes. In 2007, the CAO inquired into the means by which societies carried out those intellectual and cultural projects. A number of questions emerged from Salt Lake City that will be a focus of programming within the CAO in the near future; I will only mention four. First, how can the varied means of peer-review in the distribution of society offices, prizes, and publications be mapped and analyzed? Second, how can learned societies assure that their organizational agenda align with the diverse circumstances of faculty in the increasingly stratified system of higher education? Third, how can the executive directors of learned societies keep pace with the growing complexities of their responsibilities? And finally, how can learned societies manage the changes in scholarly research and communication brought about by digital technologies?

This afternoon we will discuss the next steps humanities scholars, learned societies, and ACLS might take to help make manifest in scholarly communication the intellectual potential that is immanent in digital scholarship. Let me mention here our more local digital innovation, the new ACLS website, which went live earlier this year. I hope that many of you have had a chance to visit it, and I especially hope that you will contribute to the site's content by supplying news from member societies and about our fellows. I want to thank our web team—Candace Frede, Ann Gaylin, Stephanie Feldman, and Sandra Bradley—for their hard work over the past two years in developing what we hope will be shared resource for all of us.

Later this year, we will have two other new resources to help us analyze and present the state of the humanities: the Assessment of Research Doctorate Programs being carried out by the National Research Council and the Humanities Indicators project led by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in partnership with a number of other organizations, including ACLS and several of our member societies.

I suspect that some in this audience have already participated in the complex and articulated series of surveys that form part of the NRC's Assessment. Two members of our Board are leaders of this effort: Charlotte Kuh is the Assessment's principal manager and Earl Lewis is a member of its governing committee. As you well know, the word "assessment" has become a flashpoint in educational policy and much ink has been spilled—or should I say, many pixels deployed—around the word's many applications. I can't revisit those controversies this morning, but I do want to emphasize three features of the NRC study that I think scholars should applaud. First, the evaluative criteria applied in the Assessment are derived from surveys of working scholars themselves. Second, when the Assessment is published, the data underlying it will be publicly

available, and those who disagree with its weightings or analyses can access those data and make their own calculations. And third, it analyzes doctoral education on several axes, not just a reputational one, providing valuable information about research impact, student support and outcomes, and the diversity of the academic environment.

I praise these qualities of the NRC Assessment knowing that the study's statistical methodology has meant that a number of smaller fields in the humanities cannot be included fully in the study. This is why the presentation of the Assessment of Research Doctorate Programs will make it incumbent upon ACLS to participate in the discussions it surely will provoke. That participation may well involve commissioning critical commentaries from scholars of the fields analyzed and also considering how the humanities, a domain with many small and emerging fields, can best measure itself.

Veterans of the Annual Meeting will remember that we have had presentations on the development of the Humanities Indicators project at the 2006 Convocation in Philadelphia, as well as last year in Montreal. You can see from the index of topics covered that the unit of analysis for the Indicators is the national humanities enterprise as a whole. The simple but challenging goal of this project has been to provide a statistical profile of the humanities at all levels of education and in public life that would parallel *Science and Engineering Indicators*, published by the National Science Foundation. Nearly 10 years of work has gone into the development of a cognate humanities resource. Needless to say, sustaining this project into the future will be a challenge for the entire humanities community.

Let me shift gears now to return to my earlier point about the important role that ACLS and learned societies play as transmission belts for the validation of scholarly practices. One example of this potential, as I mentioned to you last year, was the suggestion from our Board that staff explore how ACLS might affirmatively and explicitly support collaborative research.

We all know that the work of individual researchers producing scholarly monographs on well-focused subjects has proven to be a powerful engine for knowledge creation in the humanities. Our fellowship competitions confirm that. That said, we have also seen a growing awareness that collaborative practices offer opportunities to produce forms of scholarship that may not otherwise be possible. Certain projects generate intellectual questions and certain problems require approaches that are not comfortably housed within the confines of one discipline or the knowledge and skill-set of one scholar. The developing cyberinfrastructure for the humanities is also creating opportunities for working with a greater range and variety of sources, enabling scholars to collaborate in new ways. It seems clear that changes to the nature and working conditions of scholarship call out for a greater variety of approaches in its practice.

Collaborative research has long existed in the humanities, of course, but in the recent past it has generally been treated as the step-sister of single-author production, rather than its equal. Not surprisingly, this lack of recognition has tended to produce reluctance to engage in an activity with few institutional rewards and some degree of professional peril. Well, we think there's nothing like a major new fellowship program at ACLS to validate an undervalued practice. With these considerations in mind, therefore, we have been discussing with our constituents and with potential funders the

possibility of developing a program explicitly dedicated to collaborative research in the humanities: please stay tuned.

Speaking of funders, I think it's altogether fitting that ACLS should meet in Pittsburgh, for this city is the source of two great fortunes that remain immensely and constructively influential on American higher education in general and the humanities in particular: those of Andrew W. Mellon and Andrew Carnegie. ACLS is proud of, and grateful for, our partnership with the two foundations that bear the names of these shapers of this city.

I've spoken from this platform before of how endlessly thankful we are to the Mellon Foundation for its support of ACLS and the humanities. I'm happy to report that we have yet another occasion to do so this year. Last December the Foundation granted ACLS more than \$5 million to be used for fellowships for assistant professors.

Since 1997, ACLS—with the invaluable help of foundations, universities, and individuals—has sought to increase the size of our fellowship program in order to meet a national infrastructural need in the humanities community and also address issues of scholarly quality in an effective way. This increase has been based on an articulated strategy of fundraising and investment growth, with a timetable for achieving expansion in a sustainable manner. But while our original plans and consortial university support for endowment paid special attention to the needs of senior scholars, we now hope to balance that emphasis with additional support for their younger colleagues.

We believe that as standards for attaining tenure rise, there is increased need for research support for junior faculty. Only a very small minority of schools is able to support a full academic year's leave at full pay, and many frequently ask that faculty members seek external funding for any further time off. More commonly, assistant professors are granted a single semester of leave, which, while precious, is disproportionately less valuable than a full year off, as a wealth of testimony from our former Fellows confirms. And of course many less well-endowed institutions are unable to offer any supported leave for their junior faculty at all.

You may be interested to learn that an examination of ACLS awards in our central fellowship program to assistant professors in recent years shows that our awards are widely distributed: we have received applications from 369 institutions in the past three years, scholars from 67 institutions received awards, and no one institution won more than three of the 87 awards. Yale, Chicago, and Stanford are among the relatively prosperous institutions where junior faculty won two or more fellowships over the last three years, but multiple fellowships were also awarded to faculty at less well-off and teaching-intensive institutions including Bard College and California State University, Long Beach. But the odds of receiving one of our fellowships remain dishearteningly fierce—up to over 16:1 this year.

The generous grant from the Mellon Foundation will endow five new fellowships for assistant professors carrying stipends of \$35,000, an amount that will be adjusted upward over time, and will also allow us to raise the stipend of the 20 assistant professor fellowships we currently offer to the same level. For that, we and our awardees are truly grateful.

In 2007-08 ACLS awarded over \$9.5 million in fellowships to scholars in the United States and abroad. Let me say in conclusion that the fact that we have any fellowship programs at all at ACLS today is thanks in large measure to the first name on today's memorial list: Frederick H. Burkhardt, who served as president from 1957 to 1974. I want to end this report by explaining why we owe Fred our deepest gratitude.

If it were not for his devotion and care, I think it's fair to say that there would not be an ACLS in 2008. Just over 50 years ago, Fred, along with Howard Mumford Jones and Whitney Oates, saved the Council from bankruptcy. Let me share with you, as I have already with the Board, Professor Jones's description of the headquarters of ACLS, then in Washington, before the subsequent revival:

The ACLS was housed on the second floor of an ancient brick building not far from the Capitol. This might well have been built for the Pecksniff firm when *Martin Chuzzlewit* was a new book. The offices were at the end of a long flight of stairs almost unlighted, down which an imaginative person might have expected Little Dorrit to descend, and he would not have been surprised if, when he reached the top landing and opened the door, he had seen Tom Pinch mending a quill pen. [The Council's Executive Director] alone had an office to himself; his staff – also gathered, as it seemed to me at first, out of Dickens – seated themselves where they could. There was neither sufficient shelf space nor closet room for the records . . . There were a few modern touches, like a telephone or two and some typewriters, but when one opened the door to ACLS for the first time, he stepped back a hundred years.

This looked like the end of the line for the American Council of Learned Societies. There was about enough money in the treasury to pay the staff for the next three months, and I could not see any prospect of income beyond that time.⁵

Fred brought the organization out of its quaint but stifling decrepitude and over the next 17 years put ACLS on firmer financial footing by building its endowment and on the course of national and international programming that it still follows. My ACLS colleagues and I and, indeed, all of us here today are thus Fred's heirs, as are the more than 6,000 scholars who have been aided by ACLS in the past 50 years. Those scholars have also been teachers whose teaching was enriched by their research. Taking into account a modest estimate of those scholars' students, we can confidently say that more than eight million people have benefitted from Fred's achievement in re-founding ACLS.

ACLS is not the only institution that claims Fred as a pivotal figure. Major elements of the national infrastructure for the humanities bear his imprint, including the National Humanities Center in North Carolina, and, of course, the National Endowment for the Humanities. Fred accomplished more in retirement than many would assay to take on in working life. His dedication to the Charles Darwin Correspondence, a project that was begun in 1974 and is expected to last 50 years, is the most compelling instance of the scope of Fred's imagination and ambition. It was with his example in mind that the

⁵ Howard Mumford Jones. *Howard Mumford Jones: An Autobiography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979) 250-51.

ACLS Board named in his honor a fellowship for recently tenured scholars, young professors who need encouragement to think expansively. To date, there have been more than 90 Burkhardt Fellows, one of whom, Louise Meintjes, will speaking later today.

Forty years ago, Fred Burkhardt testified before Congress in support of the NEH. His argument on behalf of the humanities deserves to be repeated today:

The advancement of knowledge in the humanities is not as easy to discern as it is in the sciences, which have not only a structured conceptual order in which the frontiers are clearly identifiable, but which have application in our immediate lives . . . What the humanities are concerned with is keeping alive our heritage, re-examining and re-interpreting it so that it remains a living heritage, seeking to understand human nature through its past experience and achievements, and seeking to enhance our capacity to understand and enjoy the work of the wisest and most imaginative of mankind thus far. In these days, when so much of what we read and hear is meretricious or full of cynicism and disgust at our society . . . the humanities offer a solid basis for faith and optimism. The record of the humanities is the record of the capacity of human beings not only to survive but to overcome the obstacles to obtaining a quality of life that is rich and satisfying.⁶

Fred's life was rich with ideas and with service. Thanks to his life's work, ACLS is here to be of service to the world of scholarship and scholars. We are all in his debt, and it is his mission that we must continue to seek to accomplish, together. Thank you very much.

⁶ "Statement by Frederick Burkhardt, President, American Council of Learned Societies, to the Special Labor Subcommittee, House of Representatives, July 13, 1967." ts., ACLS offices, 11-12. Also available in the ACLS collection at the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.