

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.

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