

## Criticism After This Crisis: Toward a National Strategy for Literary and Cultural Study

MLA Presidential Address,  
7 January 2023

### 1. The Profession's Troubles

OUR PROFESSION IS IN TROUBLE. We all know this. We can all instantly name the troubles that we must fix: a shrinking academic job base, in which tenurable faculty with academic freedom are replaced by a reserve army of precarious workers; declining numbers of majors in literature and language fields; program closures and consolidations; and very small quantities of research funding for literature and language scholarship and for the humanities more broadly.

Can we find a root cause or two that we can take on directly? And if so, *how* are we going to take them on?

The answers are: yes, and I'm here to tell you.

First, I'm going to talk about the structural problems. We're trapped in a false narrative and I'll offer a better one. There will be employment and funding figures. This is about money. It is simultaneously about whether the profession can achieve its intellectual *and* its social goals. We want to welcome working-class students and students of color into our profession—even as we are losing graduate program funding, tenurable jobs, research funds, and whole departments. Funding problems produce justice problems: Who can and can't afford to go to graduate school? Which instructors can and can't afford to do scholarship? Who can and can't afford to come to the MLA convention? I'll be talking about jobs and money and asking you to

---

ABSTRACT How do we build the working conditions we need to really do our jobs? By *really do* I mean being able to create the new forms of knowledge that society will need to get through the next thirty years, and being able to work with our students with a scope and intensity we desire and they deserve. Only a small minority of us now have proper working conditions. We need them for the whole profession and not just for the privileged few. REPRESENTATIONS 164. © 2023 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 1–22. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2023.164.1.1>.

think about the material conditions of our missions of radical inclusion and social justice and teaching and knowledge creation.

Next I'll talk about the social demand for our knowledge. The theme here is the world wants us—wants MLA knowledge. Then I'll end with a structural solution that requires a national campaign.

Let me start by saying that I'm certain that we *should* fix our profession. I say this knowing the disappointment and anger that academia and the profession of literary study inspire in so many of our colleagues. One of our major nonfiction genres is quit lit. One of our persistent movements is abolitionism in relation to today's university. I frequently share the feelings associated with both, and I respect their arguments in favor of radically relocating criticism outside the academy by building a completely different kind of place for study. We do need what some colleagues in Bologna, Italy, call an International Parallel University to do more justice to the agency and intelligence that our own academy often wastes.

At the same time, our allies outside the university need the *academic* humanities now more than ever, and they need them to be strong. Tremendous humanities knowledge is generated outside the academy by artists, writers, and everyday people thinking, arguing, and organizing together. Social movements create languages, literatures, and discourses of every description, as do communities across the country. And yet we need dedicated spaces for *basic research* on deep and difficult issues that require advanced expertise and unfold over years. We don't need to choose between society-based and university-based humanities. We *can't* choose. We need both.

So my premise here is that society needs powerful *academic* literary studies in order to help produce the new knowledges that the world needs to heal and transform itself over the next thirty to fifty years. The profession has faltered. And yet it can be repaired, fixed, renewed, strengthened, refocused, transformed, and put on a solid foundation at every kind of college or university precisely so it is in a position to create new knowledge *and* build bridges for two-way traffic with communities.

I'm also certain that we *can* fix our various funding and institutional problems. My belief is based not on a remembrance of colleges past but on twenty years of working on university spreadsheets punctuated by five years as a coprincipal investigator on a National Science Foundation grant, when I experienced on a day-to-day basis how the other half lives—and fights for itself. There are twice as many college undergraduates today as there were fifty years ago.<sup>1</sup> Real per capita gross domestic product is greater by a factor of ten—we are massively wealthier today than when our forebears paid tax dollars to make public college free.<sup>2</sup> Federal spending on science and engineering research and development more than tripled in that period.

At the same time, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has experienced the upside-down version: corrected for inflation, its budget is one-third today of what it was in 1979.<sup>3</sup> I note this not to compete with science—STEM researchers are our kin and our allies—but to insist that *there is the money* to address our needs: plenty of money in the institutional networks of higher education.

In a situation like ours, a profession needs to act like a class that addresses the distribution of resources and seeks to wield power within the institutions that control that distribution. This is how the American Medical Association works. This is how the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine work. This is how the American Physical Society works—through a combined focus on research findings, national policy, public benefits, and career support. In the MLA disciplines, our everyday working lives are shaped by a *lack* of the militant organizational capabilities built over decades by our colleagues and allied intellectuals in other academic fields. A key goal of any profession’s militance is that it doesn’t just adapt its supply but seeks to control *demand*. Strong professions don’t adapt to markets: to support their interests, they *make* markets. Strong professions intervene relentlessly to build healthy job structures. Markets favor profits, not knowledge. Professions came into existence in part to support knowledge where markets will not.

## 2. A False Narrative and a Better One

Let’s take a look at the common understanding of the state of our profession. The media, and also university administrators, measure the health of academic disciplines with a small set of indicators. The main one is majors and the curve they’re on—up or down, at what rate, for how long. Related to this is the indicator of postgraduation wages by major.

A third metric is academic employment for humanities PhDs. This has been falling steadily for a decade. If doctoral programs launch early-career scholars into an employment void, administrators don’t want to fund them, and neither do faculty members. So for many years we have voluntarily (and involuntarily) shrunk our programs and encouraged our remaining students to look for nonacademic jobs. (Industry jobs are common for PhDs in science and engineering fields, so administrators instantly grasp the alt-ac strategy.)

We endure a public narrative based on these indicators, and it goes like this: The good jobs and salaries have shifted to science and technology. Students have followed the money, humanities majoring has declined, and therefore so has tenure-track employment. That’s the whole narrative—it is

two sentences long and is easily understood. The causality starts with market forces and runs to rational, pecuniary student self-interest in avoiding humanities majoring as a suboptimal use of cost and debt, then to reduced humanities employment. The narrative justifies colleges' shifting from tenurable to contingent hiring in literature and languages. Administrative rationality encourages nontenure-track hires in order to allow for a "wait and see" prudence toward fields whose major numbers have been unstable for decades, helping provosts to find enough instructors to handle booms in biomedical fields and data sciences.

This story is now universal common sense. And it's my duty to tell you that it's wrong.

This story is wrong in at least two ways. First, it overstates and misreads the statistical shifts in undergraduate demand. Second, it leaves out scholarship altogether.

On the first point, the story assumes a linear, proportional causality leading from pro-tech market forces to falling majors to falling job numbers. That is not what we see. Humanities bachelors' wages are 2 percent below those in the social sciences and 3.5 percent *above* life sciences wages. They are about 15 percent below wages in medical and physical sciences.<sup>4</sup> None of these wage gaps is large enough to explain the declines in majoring in English and languages, which are each down over a quarter from their recent peaks. The drops in faculty hiring are over twice as large as the drops in majoring: job listings fell 60 percent from their last peak just before the financial crisis. Something is wrong with the standard narrative.

Looking more carefully, we actually see a persistence of student interest in taking humanities courses, whether or not they are *majoring* in the field. In the US system, there's no penalty for majoring in environmental studies while enrolling in one or two literature or rhetoric courses every term.<sup>5</sup> Student interest as measured by *enrollments* has held up pretty well. The last published MLA survey of language departments found that majoring was down by a quarter but that enrollments had fallen by only a third of that.<sup>6</sup> In one humanities division that I studied in detail at the University of California, enrollments in humanities courses didn't decline at all. Enrollments rather than majors reflect actual teaching workload, so if enrollment drops are in the high single digits, as in the MLA survey, then hiring should fall about 10 percent, not 60 percent as it has.

I'll put in one more factor. A study conducted at Harvard University that tracked defectors from humanities majors found that they mostly wound up in humanities-adjacent fields—like environmental studies—where cultural knowledge can be applied to social problems of overwhelming concern.<sup>7</sup>

We must build an alternative narrative for our disciplines, and here's part one of mine: undergraduate interest in humanities *topics* has not

declined, while interest in combining these topics with knowledges from different disciplines has increased. We are seeing a growing interest in *hybrid* humanities disciplines—starting inside our own departments with combinations of criticism, composition theory, and professional writing. We are not, I suggest, seeing a shift away from literary study into the quantitative social or natural sciences or everything digital.

Let's zoom in on the alleged causal link by which a cratering in humanities majoring (not enrollments) produces a cratering in the academic job market. Here, too, the story doesn't add up. The hiring crunch predates the recent majoring declines by decades. It never closely tracked humanities degrees as a share of all degrees.<sup>8</sup> Between 1973 and 2008, the MLA job list advertised 1,000 to 2,000 jobs per year in each of its two main categories of English and languages other than English. (Composition, rhetoric, and writing are listed under English.) Good years were ones at the top of that range. Bad years were at the bottom. There were about 1,200 jobs in English in 1982, the first year I attended the MLA convention, near the start of my graduate program. That bad-year number is the same as the current period's *best-year* number of English jobs.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2012, listings have fallen steadily. They have dropped through the previous floor of 1,000 jobs per year per category, ending at 728 and 683 in 2019–20, before the COVID pandemic crushed them further. In that year, the job list showed a total of 635 *tenure-track* jobs for English and languages together—in a country that has 80,000 college teachers of literature and language. Bear in mind that student numbers have grown 54 percent since 1980, which puts job levels that much lower in the hole.<sup>10</sup> Although overall job numbers have rebounded from their pandemic depths, the MLA job list finds that early-career tenure-track jobs have not recovered: “the percentages for assistant professor rank positions . . . are the lowest recorded over the past two decades.”<sup>11</sup>

I don't need to tell you about the suffering of MLA job candidates signaled by those numbers. My point here is that job drops are between double and triple the drop in majors in English and languages. College administrators, state legislatures, and others are not “tracking market demand”; they are making intentional decisions to increase student-faculty ratios in our disciplines and to increase the share of teaching done by contingent faculty as a matter of policy. The effect is not to adapt to allegedly inexorable markets but to lower educational quality in our disciplines, which actively steers students into other fields.<sup>12</sup>

The next question is, *why* are college administrations making these policy decisions specifically for MLA disciplines and their humanities kin? There are many factors, including a very big one that we often neglect. This is the status or lack thereof of literary and language study as research fields.

Doctoral degrees are research degrees: if there's a diminished or possibly nonexistent research agenda in a field, then you don't need PhDs in it. If a field mostly provides service courses for another, grant-getting discipline, an administration will wonder why it needs to make permanent commitments to its instructors. Decades of nontenure-track hiring have turned contingent faculty into the norm and tenure—with academic freedom—into a minority privilege.<sup>13</sup> Tenure-track hiring is increasingly reserved for disciplines that conduct publicly recognized research—recognized because the results appear to address *official* economic or technological needs.<sup>14</sup>

Here's the second part of the alternative narrative I'd like our profession to tell: the MLA job list totals are falling and tenure density is falling, and falling much faster than major numbers justify, *because college and university administrators are not convinced that we are research fields*. To the extent that we are, to them, a service profession, whose main purpose is teaching undergraduates literacy skills for a capitalist economy, they do not see us as needing tenure-track jobs.<sup>15</sup> Again, tenure is to be reserved for fields that conduct recognized research. A proxy for public recognition is extramural grants and their cultural capital. But there is also general interest in unfunded research that has an identifiable intellectual agenda that benefits society, as told in narratives circulated by professional organizations. Since there is doubt about whether the study of literature and language is research, the general message has become: study your texts on your own time.<sup>16</sup>

How do we know that most administrators and policymakers don't see literary study as research? Because, in basic materialist terms, they don't fund it. In fiscal year (FY) 2021, the federal government spent \$49.2 billion on research and development in higher education.<sup>17</sup> Were federal agencies to spend *one percent* of this R&D budget on all humanities disciplines, these would receive about \$492 million per year.<sup>18</sup> However, the only federal humanities agency—the NEH—spent approximately \$32.6 million on *research* across all disciplines in FY 2019—an amount that rose to \$36.8 million after a heralded budget increase for FY 2023.<sup>19</sup> This comes to well under *one-tenth* of one percent of federal R&D funding.<sup>20</sup> If we throw in the largest private humanities funder, the Mellon Foundation, the best I could figure is an additional \$35 million per year spent directly on research.<sup>21</sup> This brings the rough total of national humanities research funding to about 0.15 percent of R&D funding sent to colleges and universities per year.

Even if we include funding for *all* types of humanities programming and activities, the US looks retro in its support for humanities scholarship. By throwing everything in, I can get humanities research to 0.9 percent of the federal total. This compares to 3.4 percent for the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, 13.1 percent for Canada's combined Social Sciences and

Humanities Research Council (the arts, humanities, social science combination comes to about 1.7 percent of the federal total in the US), and 15 percent of federal research funding spent by Mexico on humanities scholars.<sup>22</sup>

The data on research funding suggest that US policymakers see the humanities disciplines as engagement, community outreach, and teaching activities but not really as research. While the public humanities are essential and great, they cannot *replace* scholarly research. Unfortunately, that is where we are now heading. The amount of the NEH's total budget spent on research—or 21 percent of its total budget in 2019—appears to be too low to allow the endowment to be classified by the federal government as a “federal research organization.”<sup>23</sup> What I always thought was *our* dedicated federal research organization is in fact not one.

This means that “the American practitioners of the humanities—the professionals, so to speak—are now prevented in certain specific ways from realizing their full capacities and from attracting enough first-rate individuals into their ranks.” That’s not me speaking: I’m quoting the Commission on the Humanities, from the report that led to the creation of the NEH and NEA (National Education Association), written in 1964. For the commission, the two endowments were to confront this blockage of knowledge creation by doing one essential thing: providing research funding on a national scale that would lead to permanent professional infrastructure.

We are often told, in rationalizing the NEH’s miniature budget, that it was meant to support the public humanities in communities. Indeed, the commission did see the humanities as “functioning components of society which affect the lives and well-being of all the population.” Like most of us, I completely agree. Nonetheless, the commission defined the core obstacle to strong humanities as follows:

There is genuine doubt today whether the universities and colleges can insure that the purposes for which they were established and sometimes endowed will be fulfilled. The laudable practice of the federal government of making large sums of money available for scientific research has brought great benefits, but it has also brought about an imbalance within academic institutions by the very fact of abundance in one field of study and dearth in another. Much of the federal money for science requires a proportionate commitment of general university funds to sustain the higher level of activity in the scientific departments. Students . . . can quickly observe where money is being made available and draw the logical conclusion as to which activities their society considers important. The nation’s need for balanced education demands that this imbalance be remedied.<sup>24</sup>

This is an essential materialist starting point for humanities support—again, written nearly sixty years ago. The 1964 commission understood two key issues: the *external* underfunding of the humanities and the *internal*

underfunding of the humanities, that is, cross-subsidies flowing away from the humanities on campuses. The NEH was to redress this funding imbalance in extramural funds. It was also to induce universities to spend “proportionate” *internal* funds on humanities research.

Unfortunately, the NEH has not succeeded on either front. I’ve already mentioned external funding. The studies I’ve done of internal funding point in the same direction.<sup>25</sup> Universities do not compensate the humanities for poor *external* funding by spending a higher share of their *internal* funds on them. Instead, universities replicate that same low funding share, spending around one, and perhaps as high as two, percent on the humanities disciplines of the \$22.5 billion in universities’ own funds that they annually spend supporting research.<sup>26</sup> Sixty years after the commission’s report, the NEH has not corrected the funding imbalance that it saw short-changing humanities scholarship. The NEH expresses that imbalance.

You don’t need me to tell you that this is a textbook definition of epistemic injustice. You also know that it underdevelops the literature-based forms of cultural knowledge that are essential to humans’ surviving and thriving in nondestructive ways—a topic I’ll turn to in a bit.

Our counternarrative now has these two parts: student demand has held up for hybrid humanities capabilities and knowledges, but colleges have stopped treating the humanities as dynamic research fields that create capabilities and knowledges. This perceived weakness as research disciplines reduces interest in the humanities from all quarters, including the noncollege public, which has major structural problems it secretly wants researchers to solve, and undergraduates, who are looking for a coherent, exciting, and powerful knowledge system that has respect in the world and that they can use to *act on the world*. We rarely note this crucial link: trends in undergraduate majoring depend indirectly on a discipline’s national *research recognition*—at two-year and regional colleges just like anywhere else.

This counternarrative suggests that we should be expanding our research capabilities rather than cutting them back. For twenty years most doctorate-granting departments have followed a market strategy of shrinking our graduate programs—our supply—to follow declining PhD demand. Many of us were expecting this to make it easier for remaining PhDs to get an academic job. It has not. Austerity has never worked to restore a market equilibrium—and it never will. It sends a signal to administrators that we are shrinking so they can give us even less next year. We cut, they cut, we cut, they cut. It’s the opposite of a survival strategy.

Cutting doctoral output especially makes no sense now, when we are only producing about 2,000 PhDs a year in English and languages combined.<sup>27</sup> That is the minimum number of our 80,000 instructors whom we can expect to retire in a typical year. Our current PhD output is barely



keeping the lights on. As a profession, we need to focus on *increasing* tenure-track *demand*. A simple way to start our new national strategy is to just say no—no more cutting!

A strategy to expand tenured employment must also insist on the intrinsic value of our disciplinary knowledges whether anyone outside these fields recognizes it or not. Research directions and results must first be judged by the professional experts in any field: this is the basic feature of academic freedom and of professional knowledge creation. All publics deserve an explanation of what we think we've discovered and why it matters, but this needs to be a discussion in which the value of research expertise is already accepted, even as the results are of course debated.

This intrinsic value starts with the outcomes or results or discoveries of our scholarship. We cannot keep our mouths shut about the essential knowledge we have long been generating about gender, race, class, affective complexity in literary fiction, trans rights, the subjective effects of inequality, the ongoing West African literary renaissance, the formal innovations of the poetry of John Donne, radical views of the United States in the work of formerly enslaved writers, the mediation of all empirical data by symbolic forms, the ongoing pervasive impacts of every historical period that our members study—and on and on. These are our essential forms of knowledge. We must proclaim them as the results of exhaustive and rigorous research and finally, after decades of hesitation, demand necessary funding for them.

This will be easier if we are able to understand our knowledge as the result of social demands.

### 3. Social Demands for Literary Research

I think the culture wars have tricked us a bit. The culture warriors, disparaging political correctness yesterday and critical race theory today, claim to speak for a national majority. This is a project that seeks to deprofessionalize criticism, so that it lacks standing to offer knowledge to students or society. However, it has always been a project of a numerical minority that enjoys a powerful media system. One effect of these decades of discrediting has been to make us, its targets in MLA fields, underestimate the *positive* demands for our knowledge that the rest of society has been making on us all along. We have tended to narrate our intellectual history as a set of binary internal debates.<sup>28</sup> But we have in fact been responding all along to external, social demands for knowledge that apply to all disciplines in US colleges and universities.

The problem is that our profession has been institutionally shaped by those public demands for knowledge that serve a state and an economy that

*have little official use for our disciplines.* I'm going to turn to this issue now. I'm going to argue that the demands by which we have been most formed—as a profession—oppose the political economy that would support functional working conditions for our fields. Our loyalty to these *official* demands on universities—not as individuals but as a profession—takes us away from the issues most of us care about, and that the wider society wants us to work on.

Here are the official demands.

Since World War II, the first expectation for university knowledge has been that it develop ideas and technology leading to US economic preeminence and geopolitical dominance. The classic and concise formulation came from the diplomat George Kennan's statement in his Long Telegram (1948), when he wrote, "we have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population. . . . Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this *position of disparity* without positive detriment to our national security."<sup>29</sup> In the 75 years that have followed, the US government and business worlds have never deviated from this task, which is to maintain US preponderance in everything, from per capita fossil fuel consumption to military power to the dollar's reserve currency status to strategic control of the technological frontier, rekindled in the CHIPS Act of this past year. 2022's holiday book from the National Academies was called *Protecting US Technological Advantage*.<sup>30</sup>

These modes of US preeminence marginalized literary and cultural study in the academy and yet gave the MLA fields a powerful *indirect* role. This was to establish the US as the *cultural* heir to Britain as the primary global superpower. Criticism in effect defined American literary heritage as English literature. This was a de facto white heritage, and our disciplines established college-level American literary culture as, structurally, a white culture.

Criticism's other big indirect role was to maintain a barrier between its own methods and those of social or economic critique. We were asked by powerful sectors of society to maintain a firewall that separated the criticism of literature from the criticism of society. We have complied, and naturalized this distinction as the legitimate limit or boundary of the profession.<sup>31</sup>

The second social demand on colleges and universities was that they form human capital according to the needs of the private sector. We associate this with neoliberalism after 1980, but human capital theory was a creation of the 1950s. The postwar university was to deliver job training of an intellectually intensive kind. The insistence on human capital was redoubled after deindustrialization began in earnest in the 1970s and redoubled again after the 2008 financial crisis. The profession of criticism was to show itself to be a form of knowledge work, centered on intangible

(and under-articulated) *nonmonetary* effects of learning literary history, mastering close reading and really good writing as workplace “soft skills,” and the like. These were, however, helper skills, supporting the forms of professional knowledge that were seen as the direct contributors to the bottom line. The middle-class white-collar job to which the cultural form of human capital would lead would embed some bohemian freethinking in organizational conformity. Prime examples are the characters in John Cheever’s novels of tormented suburbia, or the literature professors in every novel about academia. Criticism would use its intellectual freedom to negotiate internecine emotional conflicts rather than hammer away at the power structure.

The third social demand was that the university help create the intellectual conditions for stable two-party constitutional democracy. The country’s first national commission on higher education, known as the Truman Commission, published a report in 1947 entitled “Higher Education for American Democracy.”<sup>32</sup> It called for the vast expansion of the tertiary system at a much higher level of quality, particularly through a boom in two-year colleges. It also insisted that sociocultural knowledge was as important to national life as technical knowledge. The mainstream version of this third demand, however, was for managerial democracy. An informed and active citizenry was to be reconciled to top-down authority structures in the private sector, where executive power was said to guarantee the free enterprise system and social order. Criticism helped *undermine* leveling or egalitarian forms of democracy with its focus on canons defined exclusively through aesthetic masterworks authored by beings superior to the rest of us, especially superior to critics. Though close reading might become a broad democratic practice of self-understanding, criticism preserved strict gradients of talent and, by extension, of legitimate political authority.

Fourth and last chronologically, really taking shape in the late 1970s and 80s, the university was asked to teach and study society’s multiple identities. By that I mean the university was asked to *manage* the exclusions of—and grassroots opposition to—the three previous demands, and to provide a nonthreatening space for students of color, working-class students, and, later, gender-nonconforming students.

Here, the specific task of criticism became to widen the literary canon by making it less Eurocentric, more inclusive of women writers in all periods, more queer, and more multiracial or *multicultural*, as the term was used. The study of culture would become a comparative study of multiple cultures. Diversification of faculties and student bodies became an increasingly formalized goal in the 1980s after the means were dramatically narrowed by Supreme Court decisions, particularly *Bakke v. Board of Regents of the University of California*, that limited the pursuit of diversity to serving as a plus factor at the discretion of

admissions or hiring committees rather than as the remediation of racism past and present. At the same time, criticism was to help ensure that the widening of identity norms would *not* involve a displacement of European cultures from their central place—and would *not* lead to cultural equality.

In short, for the duration of the Cold War, criticism was given a set of important cultural functions in support of Cold War capitalism. It offered Euro-cultural grounds for US disparity in power and resources; made advanced literacy a form of human capital; naturalized managerial democracy as desired by rising middle-class US culture; and fit the newly defined multicultural population into existing social hierarchies.

These were structurally conservative roles—despite the presence of radical critics. With the end of the Cold War and the ascent of neoliberalism, these functions started to lose their coherence and authority. They have been increasingly eclipsed by quite different demands from diverse publics, who were increasingly enrolling in colleges and universities after 1990. *Their* demands for academic knowledge—opposed to the official set I just summarized—have been the target of culture-wars attacks.

Before I turn to the counterdemands, I have to point out that MLA disciplines have paid a high institutional price for satisfying the official expectations for university knowledge in their disciplines. Here are four costs:

1. The anti-Sputnik waves of massive science funding brought trickle-down funding to the humanities in keeping with their auxiliary role, in the small institutional amounts I've discussed and always at the discretion of administrators as long as they felt this funding was not needed by more important disciplines.

2. Acceptance of the human capital theory of education meant that we would not easily see policy alternatives to adaptation to market forces. Crucially, MLA fields have *not* developed a strong theory of the nonmonetary or nonpecuniary benefits of literary and language study through which our fields could claim public and internal institutional funds. We have not taken on board, as a profession, the theory of the humanities as public goods—goods that are damaged by the privatization of their financial supports and that *must* be funded by society as a whole. As our fields have been cut in the name of alleged higher returns on investment elsewhere, our theoretical weakness has further undermined our institutional power.

3. On democracy, as a profession our safety has seemed to depend on acceptance of managerial protocols on our campuses. A crucial example is the lack of instructor input on resource allocation, to which the MLA officially objects.<sup>33</sup> We have not responded to decades of employment and research woes by building on our graduate student activism to devise the academic version of industrial democracy. The permanent crisis of adjunctification is the most unforgivable damage, assisted by this passivity.

4. Regarding our multiracial and economically divided society, we have not fought for resource equity across the very disparate types of colleges and universities in our system. The result has been that working-class students and students of color disproportionately attend the most understaffed and underfunded schools—year after year and decade after decade.<sup>34</sup> Many of our MLA colleagues, perhaps the majority, work under disadvantages that muffle the knowledge that comes from their unique standpoints. We have not synthesized recognition and redistribution in a fight for proper working conditions across the entire profession.

In short, even as many if not most academic critics, as individuals, broke decisively with Cold War frameworks in their work, the profession's institutions have not pried their legitimacy away from the older, official model.<sup>35</sup> Our profession, our *institutions*, are stuck between stations. This is the situation that we must now change—and that we can change.

#### 4. The Flight Out; or, the Fight Ahead

My optimism arises in part from the visibility of exhausted strategies. The United States has long addressed its problems through those four dominant demands I listed—global military sovereignty (and the use of force at home via police and prisons), tech-based capital concentration, managerial democracy, and capitalist diversity. *None* of these modes will successfully meet the needs of the world today. Only by following the tracks of popular demands can we start to meet these needs.

The world must decarbonize. It must drastically reduce the damage capitalist economies do to the physical world. It must reduce the levels of inequality and precarity that among other things feed authoritarian regimes. It must reverse its tendency to preserve the wealth of some by creating zones of abandonment for others. It must support unprecedented levels of human migration and make migration a benefit to all concerned.

To do any of these things, countries will need modes of open exchange, of unforced collaboration, of resource sharing, of just distribution like the world has never managed for more than five minutes at a time. The challenge of our era is for the United States to move past preeminence and domination as its go-to modes of sociocultural life.

Now, MLA disciplines work on the literary, cultural, and rhetorical sources of this life. These *are* issues for criticism, in which we ask about root cultural sources as expressed in art and literature and writing more broadly. Can the US develop the subjectivities, the forms of expression, the understandings of its real cultural histories, the interpersonal affects, the pervasive

multilingualism, the public self-reflection that will build a postimperial and post-technocratic order? Verdicts on such questions are the work of criticism.

We can also help make the answers to these questions an eventual yes, if—if we can participate fully in the ways that knowledge configurations are already shifting toward this different future.

We can see this as criticism responding to the popular counterdemands that have opposed the official set I described earlier. They also existed in the postwar period but have been gaining strength. Literary and cultural study, with their advanced qualitative methods, are particularly good at finding emergent cultural elements, as well as elements that pervade a society without being endorsed or codified by the powers that be.<sup>36</sup>

One: a significant share of the US population has expected national destiny to be something *other* than being the permanent superpower of planet Earth.<sup>37</sup> They have wanted academics to address “the problem of America” by identifying postimperial culture and consciousness in works of literary art. During the Cold War, this meant answering questions like: Why does US democracy support Jim Crow segregation? Or *Why Are We in Vietnam?*<sup>38</sup> The titles that drew me into American Studies included *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life, Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building*, and *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*.<sup>39</sup> I entered literary study to understand the cultural dimensions—as created and analyzed in literary texts—of why the US *felt* more readily authoritarian than democratic. Recently this demand has meant challenging anti-Black police violence, anti-Asian racism, border incarceration, transphobia, the jailing of water protectors, the suppression of nonsuburban voters, among many other issues. Criticism enables the recentering of formal cultural knowledge creation on what many of us came to call subaltern knowledges emerging within the United States as well as in the Global South.

A second counterdemand has been for the articulation of noneconomic life. This demand is for creating the narratives of a future not centered on wage work, a future of abundance without systemic exploitation and multiple forms of bondage, even a future without work as such. Poetry, fiction, essays, theater articulate the endless nonpecuniary forms of life that cannot or must not be reduced to economy. It’s hard to overstate what fundamental changes their expanded influence would produce.<sup>40</sup>

A third popular demand on university knowledge has been for democracy as broad political equality. This includes industrial democracy, in which unions would share power with corporate management in setting company policy. It includes direct community power, in which racialized, immigrant, working-class communities would associate in the polity as equals. Criticism’s roles would include the unearthing of artistic and cultural practices that enable interpersonal behaviors not rooted in coercion.<sup>41</sup>

A fourth demand has been for academic knowledge that would explore how to have—how to feel, to embody, to realize—egalitarian acceptance of all peoples in society. How do we rewrite the discourses of structural racism in all its intersectional forms? What artistic forms show how to decolonize US culture on the level of public policy? This demand on criticism is that it would locate in the culture’s texts the expressions of life as the full range of communities tried to live it without higher authorities and coercions.<sup>42</sup>

Individual critics have long worked in relation to these unofficial or popular demands coming from social movements and communities historically excluded from official knowledge production. Yet the profession has, as I’ve said, been formed in relation to the official knowledge demands. The problems with a structural and quasi-unconscious allegiance to a backward-looking paradigm are that it puts us out of joint with the kinds of cross-disciplinary knowledges society needs for the 2020s and 30s, and also that it ties us to a political economy of education in which the humanities are always poor.

On the other hand, shifting the profession toward these popular demands will have two massive benefits. The first is that we will be focusing on today’s great problems, making criticism and culture *central* to the new knowledges now required by global transitions in energy systems, economics, politics, and intercultural relations. The second is that these demands contain principles of social funding and publicly supported infrastructure that will allow the academic humanities a sustainable institutional life.

So how can we, the writing and language teachers, the cultural analysts, the critics, make *this* future more likely? How do we take our places as cocreators of the new cultures, as full partners in making the altered knowledge systems that the future needs?

Well, we continue to do the remarkable scholarship and the extraordinary teaching that we are already collectively doing, day in, day out. What we have achieved under inadequate conditions must be celebrated. We should never forget that.

But as I have been suggesting, we have no choice now but to do more.

The MLA disciplines, in the company of other humanities fields, must identify our collective needs as workers in the fields of literature, language, culture, and writing. They must reconstruct themselves as full-scale research disciplines, with an explicit staffing goal of 75 percent tenurable teacher-scholars, and seek some approximation of this ratio in every type of institution across the country. We all must face the fact that tenure-track employment will never come back unless we build a public reputation as a set of important research disciplines and a research infrastructure to realize that.

The profession has had such a bad job market for so long, and such poor research funding for its 99 percent, that we have a hard time imagining

a radical change of fate. But it *is* possible, and I can see the series of steps that over time would reconstruct our disciplines as not only intelligent but also powerful and flourishing entities.

- Phase 1: *Develop a national information system about the condition of the profession across all types of institutions.*<sup>43</sup> The humanities disciplines should restructure professional associations to enable national communication and information pooling. Professional associations in the humanities tend to be split among permanent staff at headquarters, temporary professorial officers, and a membership dispersed across thousands of institutions and fifty-one higher education systems. Headquarters has only an intermittent sense of what is going on in the trenches, and the membership is often unaware of the thinking at headquarters or policies and positions that the association takes on their behalf. The MLA has an elected delegate assembly with several hundred members, and for several years the executive committee worked to create a policy compendium that members could use (minimum salaries, academic freedom protocols, hiring standards, and so forth) as well as a reporting process so that issues like program closures could receive national attention. This national communications structure must be expanded and regularized so that we can know about problems and movements as they come up, whether the media are interested or not.
- Phase 2: *Collect and analyze national data on the state of the profession.* Humanities associations must organize a collaborative and ongoing study of humanities infrastructure, sponsored by a consortium of humanities organizations—the MLA, the American Historical Association, the American Philosophical Association, the College Art Association, the National Humanities Alliance, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, and the Mellon Foundation, for example. The system would build on the Humanities Indicators Project, the MLA and AHA job lists, and similar specialized studies and bring them together into a bigger picture. Several key elements will need to be created from the ground up. We do not currently have a national map of the profession's employment structure by type, status, salary, and workload.<sup>44</sup> We do not have a map of extramural research funding in the humanities, including state-based, local, and private expenditures specifically for original research. We do not have a map of intramural or campus-based research funding for the humanities. This is a particularly miasmatic area where regular epistemic injustice is enforced and academic freedom honored in the breach.<sup>45</sup> But we do not know the extent or variations of the problem. Last but not least, we do not know the needs or desires for research time and funding across the range of institutions. What do our instructors need in *all* types of institutions to function as teachers and also scholars? How much will it cost? What if it's \$20,000 per year in various kinds of reading and scholarship support for 80,000 literature and language instructors? That would add one-quarter of one percent to the national higher education budget.<sup>46</sup> We need a national data project so we know where we're starting from and what the wider membership wants us to pursue.



- Phase 3: *Develop a national strategy for building a new humanities infrastructure.* This will require a consortium of humanities associations. It will mean a level of communication and collaboration among humanities associations that has never been achieved before. The world situation is just as urgent now as it was after Sputnik in 1958 or at any other time in Cold War history, and humanities knowledge is utterly fundamental to workable solutions to our problems. Agencies will need to cooperate to explain this. They will need to bring the crisis of humanities research funding out of the shadows and offer concrete remedies. They will need to showcase and circulate humanities research results as commercial publishers and the news media do not. Do we need a National Bureau of Cultural Research along the lines of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) that was founded over a hundred years ago?<sup>47</sup> Do we need employment targets for our discipline? Since we produce 2,000 PhDs a year in MLA fields, should we set an explicit baseline national goal of finding 2,000 annual jobs? What size should various fields be? What kind of research funding targets for humanities research should we set over a ten-year period? How do we increase extramural funding for humanities research by an order of magnitude over a set multiyear period and redirect institutional funds to the humanities as a matter of national policy?<sup>48</sup> These and many other questions need to be answered by a new policy structure that will give MLA disciplines visibility and voice that they have never had in their history.

In short, we must organize our many learned societies into an umbrella structure that performs these tasks, designs structures to satisfy them, identifies their costs, and advocates with multiple higher education organizations at the same time. We set standards. We figure out how much meeting those standards will cost. We seek, as a national project, the teaching positions and the funding that will allow us to meet those standards. We build the infrastructure that will enable those workplace standards to exist. We work for ten years on this, for twenty years. We organize, we explain, we advocate, we celebrate—relentlessly, until the world of higher education and well beyond is unable to forget about us.

We need to build, directly and systematically, the material conditions that will allow our fields to reach their intellectual potential, to help solve global society's hardest cultural problems, to reach the least advantaged and the non-college populace more broadly, to create knowledge at the desired intensity and scale, and to give a proper employment future to our early-career scholars.

I close by repeating what I said at the start. Our society has the money to build a luxury, post-automated literary profession. There is a progressive taxation system that can be made more progressive. There is money to be transferred from negative expenditures—the military, the police, the prisons—to positive ones in health, in housing, in education. There is the money. We have the brains and energy. The issues are really—do we have the stamina? Do we have the will?

The depth, the diversity, and the range of our work are amazing. We operate an essential workforce. We are constantly pushing on the edges of the possible and the bounds of our experience. Society wants the abilities and the knowledges that we create. Our *many* allies in that society want us to help them make a revolution in culture.

This society calls on us. So let us together, as a profession, build the working conditions that will allow us to answer the call.

## Notes

---

Of the people on whom I inflicted drafts of this address, special thanks go to Avery F. Gordon and Michael Meranze for repeated readings and excellent advice. I'm grateful to Paula Krebs, executive director of the MLA, Anna Chang in MLA publications, the executive council 2020–23, predecessor presidents Judith Butler and Barbara Fuchs, and current and future presidents Frieda Ekotto and Dana Williams for several years of camaraderie, intelligence, and dedication to the larger cause.

1. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183995/us-college-enrollment-and-projections-in-public-and-private-institutions/>.
2. Per capita GDP has increased from \$6,726 in 1973 to \$69,288 in 2021. See <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/USA/united-states/gdp-per-capita>.
3. For inflation, see <https://www.inflationtool.com/us-dollar/1979-to-present-value?amount=1&year2=2022&frequency=yearly>. NEH appropriations history can be found at <https://www.neh.gov/neh-appropriations-history>.
4. See <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/workforce/earnings-humanities-majors-terminal-bachelors-degree>.
5. The trend in second majors in the humanities is not entirely encouraging, however; see <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/humanities-bachelors-degrees-second-major>.
6. See <https://www.mla.org/content/download/110154/file/2016-Enrollments-Final-Report.pdf>.
7. Harvard Working Group on the Arts and Humanities, "Mapping the Future: The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College" (2013), <https://scholar.harvard.edu/sdkelly/publications/mapping-future-teaching-arts-and-humanities-harvard-college>.
8. See Indicator II-03b: <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/bachelors-degrees-humanities>.
9. Meanwhile, undergraduate enrollments in all fields increased by nearly two-thirds. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/236352/undergraduate-enrollment-in-us-by-attendance/>.
10. For a comparison of full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment in 1980 and 2021, see Kelsey Kunkle and Sophia Laderman, "SHEF: State Higher Education Finance" (Boulder, 2023), table 3.1, 38, [https://shef.sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SHEEO\\_SHEF\\_FY22\\_Report.pdf](https://shef.sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SHEEO_SHEF_FY22_Report.pdf).
11. Natalia Lusin and Mai Hunt, "The MLA *Job List*, 2020–22" (New York, 2023), 3, <https://www.mla.org/content/download/191179/file/Job-List-Report-20-22.pdf>.

12. After I delivered this address, Nathan Heller published significant evidence of undergraduate awareness of what we might call an administration's infrastructure investment signals, which entice many out of the humanities and into disciplines in which universities are making expensive investments in prestige projects. See Nathan Heller, "The End of the English Major," *New Yorker*, 27 February 2023.
13. The MLA's recently retired data analyst, David Laurence, analyzed tenure density at the country's 4,300 colleges and universities: "more than 50%, or 2,188 institutions, deep in the universe of United States degree-granting colleges and universities and one has yet to encounter a [single] tenured or tenure-track faculty member." Colleges with 70 percent tenure-track faculties exist in only three percent of institutions and total 136. See David Laurence, "Tenure in 2017: A Per Institution View," *Humanities Commons*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/wep7-xz04>.
14. Fields create this appearance of direct service to the needs of society in part through the work of their professional organizations.
15. Christopher Newfield, "The Humanities as Service Departments: Facing the Budget Logic," *Profession*, 16 December 2015.
16. Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford, 2008).
17. Michael Gibbons, "Universities Report Largest Growth in Federally Funded R&D Expenditures since FY 2011," NSF 23-303, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 15 December 2022, table 2, <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf23303>.
18. The National Center for Science and Technology Statistics lists total humanities expenditures as \$557 million in FY 2021 (down 1.2 percent from FY 2020). I do not have access to the underlying data that went into this aggregation, but I believe that only a fraction of this total supports research. See Gibbons, "Universities Report Largest Growth," table 3.
19. National Endowment for the Humanities, "2019 Annual Report," 3, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/NEH%202019%20Annual%20REport%20final.pdf>. This figure combines Research Programs with Digital Humanities and a portion of Preservation and Access. See FY 2023 Appropriations for NEH: <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/FY%202023%20Appropriations%20Breakdown.pdf>.
20. \$32.6 million is 0.7 percent of \$46.1 billion.
21. See "The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation: Financial Statements, December 31, 2020 and 2019," [https://assets.ctfassets.net/nslp74meuw3d/2AKIYVAB8BTS17kRjmLCR/71e247a67d78057edcd1147f39b6a8a6/AWMF\\_audited\\_financial\\_statements\\_2020.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/nslp74meuw3d/2AKIYVAB8BTS17kRjmLCR/71e247a67d78057edcd1147f39b6a8a6/AWMF_audited_financial_statements_2020.pdf). Grants payable are listed as \$98.6 million in 2019 and \$144 million in 2020. Grants payable were typically somewhat under \$100 million per year in the late 2010s. In the most recent available breakdown by program (2018/2017), grants payable in the category "Higher Education and Scholarship in the Humanities" were \$48.6 million in 2017, decreasing to \$35.4 million in 2018.
22. UK Research and Innovation, "UKRI Competitive Funding Decision 2019–20," [https://higheredstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SPEC\\_2022-2.pdf](https://higheredstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SPEC_2022-2.pdf); Carlos E. Rodríguez, "El Sistema Nacional de Investigadores en números," Foro Consultivo Científico y Tecnológico, 2016, graphics 7 and 16, [https://www.foroconsultivo.org.mx/libros\\_editados/](https://www.foroconsultivo.org.mx/libros_editados/)

SNI\_en\_numeros.pdf. Regarding the Canada-US comparison, the two primary federal social science funders in the US spent as follows: the NSF's Directorate of Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences allocated \$278.6 million ("Fiscal Year 2020 Appropriations," National Science Foundation, 2020, <https://www.nsf.gov/about/congress/117/highlights/cu20.jsp>), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) spent \$88.2 million on humanities-related research infrastructure ("FY 2013–FY 2022 Budget Enacted," <https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/imls-appropriations-history-2013-2022.pdf>, subtracting American Rescue Plan one-time funding and Grants to States). The total comes to \$366.8 million, which, added to \$400 million rounded and combined NEH and NEA funding, is \$766.8 million, or 1.66 percent of the \$46.1 billion federal R&D expenditures in higher education institutions (FY 2020). In addition, the Social Science Research Council, a private institution, spent \$10.6 million on social science research (in 2019, the last available fiscal year; see "The Social Science Research Council: Financial Statements, June 30, 2019 and 2018," 5, rows 4–6, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn2/5e8d5d57b986e.pdf>). Special thanks to Ignacio Sánchez Prado for explaining Mexico's research data, and to Jason Rhody for explaining the research role of IMLS.

23. NEH and NEA are omitted from Congress's list of federal research funding agencies; see Congressional Research Service, "Federal Research and Development (R&D) Funding: FY2020," 18 March 2020, table 1, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R45715.pdf>. I have been unable to find a definitive source document that reserves status as a federal research agency to those spending \$100 million or more on research, but this does appear to be the operative definition. See, for example, "Recent Trends in Federal Support for U.S. R&D," Science and Engineering Indicators, National Science Foundation, table RD-15, note; or Alondra Nelson, "Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies, Office of Science and Technology Policy, Executive Office of the President," 25 August 2022, 1. These references suggest that NEH and NEA would need to increase their research expenditures to a bit over half of their total FY 2023 budgets in order to count as federal research agencies.
24. The Commission on the Humanities, *Report of The Commission on the Humanities* (New York, 1964).
25. Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore, 2016), 78–115.
26. For FY 2021, see Gibbons, "Universities Report Largest Growth."
27. The US ranks nineteenth of thirty-three OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries in the share of doctorates awarded to the humanities disciplines; see <https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/humanities-degree-completions-international-comparison>.
28. For example, Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago, 1980); Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987); Fish, *Save the World*; Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, 2015); Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA, 2017); John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago, 2022); Bruce Robbins, *Criticism and Politics: A Polemical Introduction* (Stanford, 2022).
29. George Kennan, "Report by the Policy Planning Staff," 24 February 1948; emphasis added. See <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v01p2/d4>.

30. See [https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/26647/protecting-us-technological-advantage?goal=0\\_96101de015-b5feaf1fb8-102056285&mc\\_cid=b5feaf1fb8](https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/26647/protecting-us-technological-advantage?goal=0_96101de015-b5feaf1fb8-102056285&mc_cid=b5feaf1fb8).
31. See Stefan Collini, "Exaggerated Ambitions: The Case for Studying Literature," *London Review of Books*, 1 December 2022, a review of Guillory's *Professing Criticism*, arguably the most influential current enforcer of this boundary.
32. President's Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education*, vol. 1, *Establishing the Goals* (Washington, DC, 1947). For discussions of its influence, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (Chicago, 2011); and Michael Meranze, "Humanities out of Joint," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 4 (October 2015): 1311–26.
33. MLA Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities, "CAFPRR Statement on Resource Allocation and Academic Freedom," 2016, <https://www.mla.org/About-Us/Governance/Committees/Committee-Listings/Professional-Issues/Committee-on-Academic-Freedom-and-Professional-Rights-and-Responsibilities/CAFPRR-Statement-on-Resource-Allocation-and-Academic-Freedom-2016>.
34. A decisive demonstration can be found in Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, "Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege," Center for Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University, 31 July 2013, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/separate-unequal/>.
35. Based on a summary paragraph by Michael Meranze, who concluded, "As a result, it is left appearing to appeal to a lot of fragmentary groups while being accused of undermining 'American' culture"; personal communication with the author, 17 November 2022.
36. A full demonstration of the empirical bases of the elements of this counter-narrative is beyond my scope here. I limit myself to recording rudimentary polling evidence of significant public interest in these elements. A full literary demonstration would involve among other things a large-scale analysis of struggle among competing narratives in contemporary literature across genres, and will be undertaken in future research.
37. As a starting point, Pew Research found that 54 percent of respondents agree that "many of the problems facing our country can be solved by working with other countries," while 45 percent thought "few" could be resolved with international cooperation. When asked whether they agreed that "the U.S. should be the single world leader," only 11 percent said yes. When asked whether "the U.S. should play a shared leadership role in the world," 78 percent said yes. Given the conservative nationalism hardened by the Cold War and the Bush-era Global War on Terror, these numbers suggest strong latent support for post-superpower international relations; see Reem Nadeem, "Majority of Americans Confident in Biden's Handling of Foreign Policy as Term Begins," Pew Research Center, 24 February 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/02/24/majority-of-americans-confident-in-bidens-handling-of-foreign-policy-as-term-begins/>.
38. Norman Mailer, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (New York, 1967).
39. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1976); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis, 1980); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT, 1973).

40. A recent survey by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) found that respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed in high percentages to the following statements about the humanities: “activities and discussions are a great way of spending time with friends and family” (90 percent); they “help children and adolescents develop the skills they need in life” (87 percent); they “make for a more meaningful and happy life” (85 percent); and they “help people think more clearly” (84 percent). I interpret “skills they need in life” as going beyond job skills. These very high levels of approval were nearly matched by the positive response to the question about pecuniary benefits: do the humanities “make the economy stronger,” with 73 percent strongly or somewhat agreeing. See Norman Bradburn, Robert Townsend, Carolyn Fuqua, and John Garnett, “The Humanities in American Life: Insights from a Survey of the Public’s Attitudes and Engagement,” report from the Humanities Indicators Project of the AAAS (2020), figure 2B, <https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/The-Humanities-in-American-Life.pdf>.
41. In a large, international survey, Pew found that the percentage of US respondents who agreed that the US political system needed “major changes” or needed to be “completely reformed” was 85 percent; 42 percent, not far short of half of US respondents, are in the “completely reform” camp. See Richard Wike et al., “Citizens in Advanced Economies Want Significant Changes to Their Political Systems,” Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project, 21 October 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/10/21/citizens-in-advanced-economies-want-significant-changes-to-their-political-systems/>. In the AAAS poll, regarding the role of the humanities on this issue, 86 percent of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the humanities “are important for strengthening American democracy.”
42. For example, 91 percent of US respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the humanities can “help one understand people whose lives are different from their own and to appreciate cultural diversity.” 73 percent strongly or somewhat agreed that the humanities can “help me feel part of my local community”; Bradburn et al., “The Humanities in American Life,” n39.
43. I use the word “national” here not in opposition to “international,” which we must also be, but in opposition to fragmented noncommunication that encourages an overfocus on conditions at a few leading universities.
44. The CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 authorized the restart of the National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF), which must include full data on non-STEM academic staff. The same goes for the annual HERD survey (covering higher education research and development expenditures), conducted by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. MLA and kindred organizations should work directly with the relevant bodies on developing these instruments.
45. See “CAFPRR Statement on Resource Allocation and Academic Freedom.”
46. The US postsecondary education sector spent \$702 billion in 2020–21, according to calculations by the National Center for Education Statistics; see <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=75>.
47. Research findings and other materials that show economics continuously working to produce new knowledge are available at <https://www.nber.org>.
48. This is related to moving toward the full funding of sponsored research such that universities do not need to subsidize it to the extent that they currently do. This has been an unaddressed problem for many decades.