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### Title

"The Humanities Initiative," UC Irvine, Irvine, California

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1mq3p70w>

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### Publication Date

1987-10-23

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THE HUMANITIES INITIATIVE

David Pierpont Gardner, President  
University of California

Irvine  
October 23, 1987

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I am delighted to be here and to join Chancellor Peltason, Executive Vice Chancellor Lillyman, Professor Krieger, Professor McDonald, and their colleagues in welcoming you to this opening conference launching the University of California Humanities Research Institute. This is an exciting moment for the University and I am very pleased to be sharing it with you.

I wish to speak briefly about the genesis of what we are calling the University of California Humanities Initiative, and then I will welcome any comments or questions you may have.

When the Humanities Initiative was presented to the Board of Regents last month, I noted my concern about the future of the humanities in American higher education. As a university president--first at the University of Utah and now here--I could hardly fail to notice that the humanities have been confronting more than their share of difficulties in recent years, problems that are national in their character, and not merely institutional in scope. For example, in its 1980 report on the condition of the humanities in America, the Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities found much that was disturbing: the declining quality of humanities education in the schools, deteriorating support for America's cultural institutions, insufficient funding for humanities research.

Such trends are worrisome. They are very worrisome. But they are not the principal reason I have been concerned about the future of the humanities in our colleges and universities.

The problem, in my view, lies not just in the inadequacy of funding or a seemingly indifferent public or a neglect of this matter by the universities themselves--as serious as these all are--but that somehow, over time, the humanities have come to play a less vital role in education than they should.

The humanities are concerned with what it means to be human, with ultimate questions and issues, and the skills we must acquire to function as complete human beings. And the humanities are, ideally at least, connective disciplines: languages, literature, linguistics, history, archaeology, philosophy, jurisprudence, comparative religion, ethics, the history, criticism, and theory of the arts--these and related disciplines constitute the heart of our cultural legacy. They not only connect us with our past, but also help us comprehend what other people and other ages have done, what they have thought and believed, and how they have suffered in the process of discovering their own humanity.

Yet they are connective in another sense as well. They help us make sense of the sometimes conflicting, sometimes frustrating, sometimes pleasurable events we encounter each day. They offer us the experience of wholeness because they touch us at the

deepest levels of mind and personality. They are inclusive disciplines, helping us to create larger and more comprehensive meaning out of the fragmentariness of everyday life, but within the context of ultimate questions and issues.

In the contemporary American university--and in other universities as well--the pursuit of wholeness is, inevitably, more honored in the breach than in the observance. There are understandable reasons for this. The explosion of knowledge in this century and the last has made it nearly impossible to possess an in-depth working knowledge of both the humanities and the sciences. The fragmentation of knowledge and disciplines into departments is a reality in the University of California and elsewhere. There is little likelihood that this will change quickly, or at all, for that matter.

One unfortunate result of this state of affairs is that we have come to treat the humanities as if they were just one more specialized set of subjects among many others. By placing the humanities into such disciplinary pigeonholes, we encourage the tendency to set them apart from all the other disciplines, to isolate them and to insulate them, when we should instead be seeking to reconcile them with other fields of knowledge.

There have, of course, been many efforts to bridge the gap between the humanities and other disciplines, and I want to mention just one. At the University of Utah, where I spent ten

years as President, a five-quarter lower division course is offered that acquaints students with the intellectual traditions of Western civilization. It does so by integrating the study of the sciences and the study of the humanities. The course is taught by two professors, one a scientist and one a humanist. The reading list consists only of original sources, and both professors attend all the classes, review most of the students' written work together, and plan the course jointly. One version of the course, for example, took as its unifying theme the relationship between scientific thought and society's views on such matters as epistemology, ethics, politics, and religion. Students are asked to explore some interesting questions: could Thomas Hobbes have written The Leviathan without the stimulus of Renaissance science? Would what we call the Enlightenment have been possible without Newton? What scientific assumptions underlie medieval religious thought? What does Dante's universe owe to Hellenistic science?

Students are encouraged to look at science and the humanities not as mutually exclusive disciplines but as complementary intellectual endeavors that have something to say to each other. The same is true of the humanities and every other discipline, from the fine arts to the social sciences to the professions.

Yet somehow we seem to have a diminished sense of, and appreciation for, the broad humanizing role the humanities play

in education. "All knowledge becomes humanistic," the philosopher Charles Frankel once said, ". . . when we hear the human voice behind what is being said." That voice ought to be heard all across the curriculum, from grammar school through university studies. It should be heard in the education of our undergraduates, in the research we encourage and advance, and in discussions of fundamental issues facing our society, including those that have been raised by advances in science and technology--issues that cannot be resolved either by science and technology or the humanities, when each works independently.

It was with these thoughts in mind that, in 1985, I appointed an ad hoc committee to advise me on ways to further and encourage the humanities and humanities research in the University of California.

The result, as you know, was a four-part program that The Regents approved at their meeting last month. As you also know, it consists of the following elements:

- . First, support for major organized research projects on each campus that have the potential to grow into organized research units in the humanities;
- . Second, research fellowships in the humanities for UC faculty that will address the problem of scarce

extramural support in two ways: they will supplement research awards received by our faculty from other sources--foundations, governments, scholarly societies, and the like--and will offer full UC-funded fellowships for promising UC researchers;

. Third, University Predoctoral Fellowships intended to attract outstanding young scholars to UC to study the humanities. In our 1988-89 budget request, we will ask the State to match the funding we are dedicating to the fellowship program in order to assure adequate graduate student support in the humanities;

. Fourth, the Humanities Research Institute, with which you are well-acquainted, and which is crucial to the success of the entire enterprise.

Let me underscore the fact that we expect that the Institute will support and encourage many of the things traditionally done in the humanities--individual research, study, reflection, and writing on various humanistic themes. But we are also hoping that the Institute will serve, symbolically and actually, as a force for collaborative work among humanists from different fields, different campuses, different universities worldwide. It is here that scholars from UC and elsewhere will meet and learn from each other.

It is you, of course, who will decide what directions the Institute will take. As you consider that question, let me mention three areas in which I believe the Institute is in an excellent position to make lasting contributions.

First, in furthering an understanding of other countries and other cultures. One of the most significant trends of our century is the growing internationalization of our world, a trend that can be seen in trade, in manufacturing, in economics, in politics--in virtually every aspect of life. In such a world it is not sufficient just to be comfortable within our own country and our own culture. We need affirmatively to seek ways and means of understanding other countries, other cultures, and other peoples--as we hope they will understand us.

This requires a deliberate and aggressive expression of interest on the part of humanists to help society bridge that gap. Humanists today have a rare opportunity--not only to help us better understand the meaning of our own culture in an interdependent world, but also to help us educate ourselves about the rest of the globe. This Institute can serve to heighten our awareness of both what unites us with and what separates us from other cultures. In other words, I hope the Institute's work will develop an international, not a parochial, perspective.



Second, in opening new lines of communication between the humanities and other disciplines. This is a compelling need, given the seemingly endless division of knowledge into smaller and smaller parts at the very time the disciplines need to be informing one another more fully. For example, medical advances alone have raised troubling and controversial questions: do we have the right to terminate life under certain circumstances? Or to prolong it indefinitely by artificial means? What are the ethical, legal, and human implications of creating new forms of life? The human genome project now under way, in which UC scientists will be much involved, will bring these issues quickly to center stage.

Questions like these require collaborative work on the part of scientists and humanists because they cannot be answered either by science or by the humanities, working independently of each other; they are, like life itself, radically interdisciplinary. The Humanities Research Institute represents an invaluable opportunity to cross disciplinary boundaries, and I hope you will seize it and make the most of it.

Third, to help us reinvigorate undergraduate education. I have already emphasized my conviction that the humanities are indispensable to a liberal education and that a humanistic perspective ought to inform all the disciplines

in a university. The Utah example I mentioned a moment ago is one way to do this; there are many others. This Institute can help by giving humanists the opportunity to explore new perspectives and new avenues in their field and relating these to our undergraduate curriculum. Moreover, the mere sense of excitement about one's work, of being at the cutting edge in one's discipline, will have a salutary effect in any classroom.

But it will be you, not I, who will chart the future of this endeavor. I can only help and encourage as circumstances permit.

Allow me leave you to your deliberations with the words of novelist Herman Wouk, who spoke at a University Charter Day a few years back about the arts and humanities. This is part of what he had to say:

Our generation has had the extraordinary experience of seeing photographs of astronauts' footprints in moondust. Unlike footprints on earth, those footprints will never be erased. They will be there forever, because there is no wind on the moon. No winds of time, no winds of change, no winds of war will ever sweep across those frontiers and erase them. I suggest to you that the arts and humanities are footprints in moondust, eternal footprints that can lead the way to the future.

I wish to thank all those who have worked so hard to make this Institute a reality and who will be working to make it a success. Good luck.