

Academy News and Projects

A Decade of Study on the Humanities

At a meeting of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, held at the Academy in 1998, leaders of national humanities organizations expressed concern about a growing lack of public understanding and support for the humanities. The gathering served as the impetus for establishing the Academy's Initiative for Humanities and Culture to analyze and address the challenges facing the humanities and to articulate their importance in American civic and cultural life.

As Leslie Berlowitz, Academy CEO, has observed, "The humanities are crucial to understanding and interpreting what it means to be human, but by the late 1990s, many humanists feared that their work was becoming marginalized in academia and in society. The Academy decided to mobilize its resources to examine the state of the humanities and to develop resources and policies that would ensure their strength and significance in the twenty-first century."

"Humanists, who in the 1970s and 1980s, went through advanced exercises in public handwringing, are now ready to make a conscious effort to understand not only the changing nature of their particular fields but also the state of the humanities in terms of research, education, and the larger society. To demonstrate the value of the humanities in our culture, we need reliable data and informed analyses; we can no longer allow prescription to preempt description."

– Francis Oakley

Ten years later, projects under the Initiative for Humanities and Culture have involved hundreds of participants, led to unprecedented collaboration with national humanities organizations, sponsored original research, and resulted in groundbreaking efforts to compile reliable statistical information about the humanities. The Initiative has produced three white papers and two published volumes of essays exploring the evolution of humanities disciplines and institutions.

The Academy's decade-long commitment to the Initiative reflects a tradition of leadership in advancing the humanities. Over the years, it has played a pivotal role in establishing such important humanities institutions as the American Council of Learned Societies, the Independent Research Libraries Association, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Council on American Overseas Research Centers. In the mid-1970s, the Academy was the principal catalyst in the development of the National Humanities Center in North Carolina, now regarded as one of the world's leading institutes for advanced study in humanistic scholarship.

The Initiative for Humanities and Culture continues to develop the intellectual and material resources that will enable the humanities to thrive. Under the guidance of cochairs Denis Donoghue (New York University), Steven Marcus (Columbia University), Francis Oakley (Williams College), Patricia Meyer Spacks (University of Virginia), and Leslie Berlowitz



(American Academy), it is focusing on two issues vital to the health of the humanities: data collection that will serve as the basis for effective policy-making in the humanities and scholarship on the recent history and current state of the humanities.

Data Collection

When the Initiative was created, Steven Marcus argued that the humanities are the only disciplines that lack statistical data. In comparison with the prodigious amount of information available in science and technology, there are no comprehensive, longitudinal data on the humanities. Without knowledge of basic trends in these disciplines, it is difficult to develop sound policies for the humanities and to make a cogent case for funding them.

With its interdisciplinary membership and strong convening power, the Academy took the lead in organizing a consortium of

humanities organizations to create a database for the humanities. The rationale for a set of "Humanities Indicators," modeled after the National Science Foundation's *Science and Engineering Indicators*, was outlined in the Initiative's first white paper, *Making the Humanities Count: The Importance of Data* (2002). Two other data-related reports followed: *Foundation Funding for the Humanities: An Overview of Current and Historical Trends*, published in collaboration with the Foundation Center (2004); and *Tracking Changes in the Humanities: Essays on Finance and Education* (2005).

In 2006, the Academy secured major funding to develop the Humanities Indicators, including datasets, tables, charts, and interpretive essays; a draft will be completed later this year. Norman Bradburn (National Opinion Research Council) joined the Initiative to lead this part of the project. Drawing on existing data, the Indicators will provide statistical measurements on the health of the humanities in five areas: 1) Primary and Secondary Education in the Humanities, 2) Undergraduate and Graduate Education in the Humanities, 3) Humanities Workforce, 4) Humanities Funding and Research, and 5) Humanities in American Life.

In addition to collecting existing data on the humanities, the Initiative has taken steps to collect new data in areas where statistical information does not exist. The Modern Language Association, American Historical Association, College Art Association, Linguistic Society of America, American Academy of Religion, American Political Science As-

sociation, the Association of American Universities, and the American Council of Learned Societies have been working with the Academy to organize a *Humanities Departmental Survey*. Under the direction of Arnita Jones (American Historical Association) and John Hammer (American Academy), it is gathering information on faculty teaching and research, the tenure process, distribution of teaching loads, the number of majors and minors, and the type of jobs secured by graduates in departments of history, modern languages and literature, art history, linguistics, and religion.

The pilot survey was administered during the 2007–2008 academic year to over 1,400 humanities departments at institutions across the country. The Statistical Research Center of the American Institute of Physics is overseeing data management and collection, with the analysis and evaluation to be completed later this year. To date, over 60 percent of the work has been completed. The long-term goal is to develop a system of regular surveys that produces comparable data across academic disciplines.

Scholarship on the Humanities

In addition to data collection, the Humanities Initiative has also developed new scholarship on the history, content, and direction of the humanities in America. In 2006, the Academy released two volumes exploring the evolution of humanities disciplines in the twentieth century. A *Dædalus* issue, *On the Humanities*, edited by Patricia Meyer Spacks, analyzes the changes

that shaped the disciplines of law, literary studies, African American studies, history, and philosophy. The second volume, *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II*, edited by David A. Hollinger (University of California, Berkeley) and published by Johns Hopkins University Press, features essays on post–World War II social forces that transformed the humanities.

“The Humanities Now,” a *Dædalus* issue coedited by Patricia Meyer Spacks and Leslie Berlowitz, will be published later this year; it will focus on the importance of the humanities in American life and the challenges faced by humanities disciplines within and beyond academia. A number of essays will utilize data being compiled by the *Humanities Indicators* and *Departmental Survey* projects.

Humanities Resource Center Online

The Academy has created the *Humanities Resource Center Online* to house and disseminate data, commentary, and publications produced by the Initiative. The site will also include a list of selected publications and links to humanities-related organizations, associations, higher education groups, and government agencies.

Funding and Foundation Support

Throughout its ten-year history, the Initiative for Humanities and Culture has received generous support from numerous donors



Looking Ahead

While the Initiative for Humanities and Culture has contributed a great deal to advancing the role and impact of the humanities in the United States, more work is still needed. Following the release of the *Humanities Indicators*, the *Humanities Resource Center Online*, and the second *Dædalus* issue dedicated to the humanities, the existing 77 indicators will be updated as new data become available.

In March 2009, the Academy will sponsor a national conference in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with the publication of the second *Dædalus* issue. The meeting will bring together leaders in the humanities, representatives of the learned societies and national associations, as well as policy-makers to reflect on and reaffirm the importance of the humanities to our society.

Efforts are also underway to develop a national system of ongoing humanities data collection based on the *Humanities Indicators*. A second *Departmental Survey* is planned for fall 2009, and the content of the *Humanities Resource Center Online* will continue to add links and enable users to go behind the charts to access data directly. ■

and foundations. The Academy is grateful to the following individuals and organizations for supporting its efforts to strengthen the humanities in academia and in American life: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Teagle Foundation, Sara Lee Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Walter B. Hewlett, the William R. Hewlett Revocable Trust, John P. Birkelund, Elihu Rose and the Madison Charitable Fund, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Academy is indebted to the Fellows and Foreign Honorary Members who over the past decade have contributed their time, energy, and expertise to the important work of this Initiative. The knowledge and experience of the professional societies and humanities organizations that are working with us on this project has been an invaluable resource, and the Academy looks forward to continuing this collaboration.