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Humanities and Social Sciences Are Central to National Goals, Report Argues, By Dan Berrett

A new report commissioned by a bipartisan quartet of lawmakers seeks to bolster the sagging fortunes of the humanities and social sciences, arguing that those disciplines are central to the nation's civic, cultural, economic, and diplomatic future.

The report, "The Heart of the Matter," was produced by the Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, a blue-ribbon panel that was formed by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences at the lawmakers' request. The commission's task was to identify what federal and state governments, universities, teachers, foundations, and individual donors can do to "maintain national excellence in humanities and social-scientific scholarship and education" to help achieve national goals.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee, and Sen. Mark R. Warner, Democrat of Virginia, requested the report with Rep. Thomas E. Petri, Republican of Wisconsin, and Rep. David E. Price, Democrat of North Carolina.

The commission's 54 members include scholars in the humanities and social sciences, as well as scientists, engineers, business executives, philanthropists, and artists.

The commission's recommendations contain little in the way of grand plans requiring major public support; the report often calls for consortia of government, foundations, and businesses to foot the bill for such programs as graduate fellowships in the humanities and social sciences, the teaching of languages and culture, and increasing study-abroad opportunities.

Recommendations include providing more support for the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation, and passing a "National Competitiveness Act" to support international affairs and transnational studies.

Harvard Mounts Campaign to Bolster Undergraduate Humanities

The report does not, however, set dollar amounts or measurable goals of the sort that were contained in an influential 2005 report, "Rising Above the Gathering Storm," issued by the National Academies, which set benchmarks to support science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, the STEM fields.

The comparatively limited scope of the commission's recommendations reflects the austerity of the times, said Howard J. Silver, executive director of the Consortium of Social Science Associations. "There was a strong recognition, given the budgetary constraints for the federal government and the states," he said, "that the idea of giving more resources in any of these areas is a very hard thing for people to ask for these days and still maintain their credibility."

Other recommendations include encouraging humanists and social scientists to join teams of scholars that study complex issues like health, energy, and resource development; promoting the study of

foreign languages and other cultures; expanding opportunities for study abroad; and developing a "culture corps" to bring social-sciences and humanities knowledge to the public.

The report's authors also direct several critiques toward academe. They fault a tendency among scholars to be too inward-facing with their research, an attitude that leads, they write, to "academic self-enclosure."

"If scholars in the broad humanistic disciplines expect the public to be more financially supportive," the authors write, "they must make the case for the public value of their work much more effectively than they have in recent years."

Concern From Social Scientists

Early reactions to the report have been favorable, for the most part.

"The distinguished members of this commission have produced a far-reaching and thoughtful report," Rosemary G. Feal, executive director of the Modern Language Association, wrote in an e-mail. She added that she was especially pleased that the commission recognized the value of language study. "Government, colleges and universities, and the American public must now work toward the goals of this report: full education for American citizens, a strong and competitive society, and real tools for leadership in an interconnected world," she said.

While the emphasis on the humanities was welcomed by some, it seemed to come at the expense of the social sciences, said Sally T. Hillsman, executive officer of the American Sociological Association. "The social sciences are awkwardly and incompletely incorporated in the discussion, but not fully or in a particularly comprehensive or powerful way," she said.

For example, Ms. Hillsman said, the report's recommendations for elementary and secondary education seem to conflate social studies with the social sciences, which is a broader constellation of fields that typically include such disciplines as psychology, communication science, and education research, and which are not often thought of as social studies. "I don't see much in this report that commends it with respect to social sciences," she said.

There could also be a risk to social sciences in being associated too closely with the humanities, said Mr. Silver of the social-sciences consortium. "Our concern is that Congress looks at this report and says, 'Humanities and social sciences? Maybe we take social sciences out of the NSF and give them the equivalent of the NEH,'" he said. "I think that would be something we'd feel very concerned about."

Still the report's analysis of the importance of those disciplines in a well-rounded education remains sound, said Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. "They've done an admirable job of putting this in the most constructive terms," she said, adding that the report was "clearly released in a fraught environment."

Much of the report affirms the broad importance of the humanities and social sciences. "We live in a nation that has been built—thought by thought, discovery by discovery—on a foundation of humanistic

and social-scientific scholarship," the authors write, "from our founding rooted in Enlightenment philosophy to a future informed by the compilation and analysis of Big Data."

It also emphasizes the importance of the humanities and the social sciences in education at all levels, describing them as part of a "distinctly American form of education: broad, comprehensive, and balanced, recognizing the interdependence of all areas of knowledge."

While such sentiments may have once seemed bland to the point of being a truism, the increasingly negative views surrounding those disciplines have made statements of support an urgent priority, said Ms. Schneider.

"We are at a point in our national discourse on what matters in higher education," she said, "which has become so lopsided, so truncated, so shriveled, that simply to say that the humanities and social sciences are absolutely central to what matters in our cultural, social, and educational programs is itself bold."