

ACLS Statement on the National Call to Action Issued by the US Secretary of Education

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In an August 3 public letter, Secretary of Education Linda McMahon issued a National Call to Action, citing a decline in Americans' trust in higher education. She called on university presidents and governing boards to "reaffirm their commitment to serving the American people" and to explain their plans for reform in seven areas: admissions; the free exchange of ideas; intellectual pluralism; affordability; AI and grade inflation; foreign influence and security concerns; and clarifying their institution's contributions to the national good.

We welcome all good-faith expressions of support across the political spectrum for the institutions that produce and circulate knowledge, including calls for improvement and accountability. The Secretary makes compelling points about affordability, clear admissions policies, and the value of robust debate on campus: we agree with the president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities that many institutions are already engaged in addressing these issues.

But trusting that these are good-faith expressions is difficult, given this administration's open contempt for America's world-renowned system of higher education. By slashing federal funding, setting restrictive limits on student financial aid, conducting questionable investigations and litigation, preventing valuable opportunities for foreign students and vital international exchange, and encouraging the repression of free expression, it has done terrible damage to research and teaching and undermined the knowledge base that ensures human flourishing in the United States and around the world.

Secretary McMahon singles out the humanities and humanistic social sciences for special criticism. Citing a research paper composed by a small group of scholars without any input from the ACLS member societies that support these fields, she suggests that the "politicization" of humanistic study has contributed directly to the decline in public trust.

The Secretary's letter conveniently omits that her own administration has done its best to undermine public trust by habitually painting academia as the enemy. Her implied complaint about politicization also ignores the proud, centuries-old role humanistic knowledge has played in planting the seeds of political progress around the world.

The revolution that created the United States would never have begun without the founders' careful study of ancient and modern history as well as political theories that were radical at the time. Later fights for women's rights and civil rights were fueled by philosophy and theology. Colonized regions of the world liberated themselves from oppression and created new national identities through the study of literature, languages, history, and the fine arts. Today these fields

are helping us understand the truth about ourselves and our history by lifting up the experiences of historically marginalized groups.

For as long as the United States has been a nation, Americans have viewed the study of history, literature, philosophy, religion, languages, politics, society, and the arts as key to the common good. Why? The study of human endeavor in all its aspects is one of the most profound experiences of freedom available to us. It inspires self-knowledge and creativity. It makes possible mutual understanding across cultural, linguistic, and religious differences. It hones skills of interpretation, of determining fact from falsity, of communicating truthfully and clearly, of building logical, evidence-based arguments. It helps us grapple with foundational questions of morality, identity, and obligation. All these things bolster the historical and critical judgment good democratic citizenship requires.

Our world is one of rapid change and wicked problems, from climate change and public health to the challenge of new technologies, notably artificial intelligence. Secretary McMahon calls for academic programs that meet “urgent workforce needs” and advance American security and economic interests. Many business leaders point out that a liberal arts education, which has the humanities and humanistic social sciences at its core, is the best preparation for grasping complex situations, handling change, understanding many different types of people, and communicating clearly.

The Secretary praises American higher education’s historic role in exciting in students the “love of beauty and truth.” Surely she knows that calling for “high-return” degrees, as she does later in her memo, frequently serves as an excuse to close academic programs in the arts and humanities – despite studies showing their role in improving resilience and mental health.

Scholars of anthropology, archaeology, art history, cultural studies, geography, history, literary studies, linguistics, music, philosophy, political science, religious studies, rhetoric, and sociology are active combatants against cruelty and nihilism, which are born of fear of the unknown. Like their sibling fields in the sciences, the humanities and humanistic social science enable us to live our best lives as free people, individually and in common, in peace and prosperity.

We call on Secretary McMahon and all readers of her letter to stand with us in support of this vital knowledge and for the funding it deserves. We call on the administration to support a vision of the university as the training ground for democratic citizenship, for the solving of challenges from plutocracy to the rise of artificial intelligence, and for broad learning about the full spectrum of human endeavor, past and present.

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