United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 27, 2010

Mr. Louis Wellington Cabot
Interim Chair of the Board
American Academy of Arts and Sciences
Norton’s Woods
136 Irving Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Ms. Leslie Cohen Berlowitz
President
Norton’s Woods
136 Irving Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Dear Mr. Cabot and Ms. Berlowitz:

We are writing to ask that the American Academy of Arts and Sciences assemble a distinguished group of individuals to assess the state of humanistic and social scientific scholarship and education—including public and private colleges and universities, community colleges and public and private primary and secondary schools or other education programs—and respond to the following question:

What are the top ten actions that our country, including federal, state and local governments, universities, foundations, educators, individual benefactors and others should take now to maintain national excellence in humanities and social scientific scholarship and education, and to achieve long-term national goals for our intellectual and economic well-being; for a stronger, more vibrant civil society; and for the success of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century?

The American system of humanistic and liberal arts education is an example for the world and a major source of our vitality as a representative democracy. Our strong tradition of research and scholarship in the humanities and social sciences—in history, jurisprudence, philosophy, foreign languages, cultural studies, sociology and economics—is, in large part, responsible for our nation’s unique ability to evolve with historical circumstances. We are concerned that this great tradition of humanistic teaching and research is at risk, and as a result, puts the unique American character at risk as well.
The purpose of this request is not to provide justification for increased federal funding for the humanities but instead seek ways to use available resources more effectively. The United States of America is a constitutionally decentralized nation created by a group of states that operates community by community in the humanities and arts. Our society is comprised of Americans of many different races, ethnicities, creeds, and religions. Yet, despite all this diversity, we are bound together by shared ideals upon which this nation was founded, including liberty, equal opportunity, free markets, and the rule of law. This combination of diverse backgrounds and shared ideals yields a unique need to consider the appropriate roles of the government (federal, state, and local), non-profit, and private sectors.

As other nations race to adopt the American system of liberal arts education as a foundation for economic growth and geo-political competitiveness, our nation’s humanistic research enterprise is shrinking as a result of growing financial challenges and a diminished interest in our national history and shared values. We ask that your report assess the organizational, intellectual and financial capacity of public and private American research universities to sustain and strengthen humanities and social scientific scholarship, and the education of our primary and secondary education teachers. We also ask that your report review the performance and outcomes of current efforts and make recommendations on ways to strengthen existing metrics and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness moving forward. While this report should focus on the humanities and social sciences as crucial and discrete components of America’s intellectual enterprise, it should also address their importance to our government as well as our scientific and industrial communities. Our nation’s founders valued broad humanistic and scientific education as the basis for an informed citizenry and a representative government. The Founders also imposed limitations on the central government and valued the role of the private sector leadership. The humanistic and social scientific disciplines help to ensure that we will honor the lessons of the past even as we think clearly about the challenges we will face in the future.

This report, we expect, will provide essential guidance for future decisions by federal, state, and local government leaders as well as our universities and schools.

Sincerely,

Lamar Alexander  
United States Senator

Mark R. Warner  
United States Senator