

Humanities, social sciences critical to our future: Column

Norman Augustine and David Skorton 6:08 p.m. EDT June 18, 2013

1 *Former Lockheed Martin CEO and Cornell president say liberal arts are being shortchanged.*



(Photo: John McCoy, AP)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Humanities and social sciences, not just physical and life sciences, are vital to the future.
- Colleges need to make a more compelling case for liberal arts education and deliver on that promise.
- The bipartisan Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences is issuing a report on the subject.

Once again, in our contentious Congress, the sideshow is upstaging the circus. While our representatives are busy [defining](#) what kind of political science research the National Science Foundation is allowed to fund, they are overlooking the big picture — that the humanities and social sciences, not just the physical and life sciences, are also vital to the future of this country.

Can there really be any serious disagreement that strong skills in English language arts and mathematics, as outlined in the "Common Core" standards that have been [adopted by 45 states](#) for their K-12 programs, are a powerful starting point for preparing students for college, careers and

effective citizenship? Or that teachers, like their students, need to know the expectations for success and have the resources necessary to meet them? Without literacy and numeracy, our young people aren't going to make it in school, in 21st century life or in the working world. Let's not shortchange them in the name of overstated local autonomy or states' rights. The Common Core standards were developed with the leadership of governors, not Washington.

Focus on competitiveness

While we're at it, let's make it a nationwide goal to begin second-language study in the earliest years, encourage international experiences for undergraduates, and continue the federal programs that [further language study and cultural immersion](#). Such investments enhance our competitiveness and security.

Let's continue to enlarge our knowledge of ethics, civics, geography, history and society through research. We need to protect America's peer-reviewed, idea-driven research that virtually every other nation is seeking to emulate, stabilize the funding for such work, and prepare a new generation of graduate students who can take this knowledge into careers within and beyond academia.

The two of us have spent much of our careers dealing with science. On many issues, we gravitate toward opposite ends of the political spectrum. But when it comes to hiring people to drive innovation in business and the academic world, we've looked not only for technical skills but for qualities such as inquisitiveness, critical thinking and the ability to work with a range of people — skills that are developed through rigorous engagement with the social sciences and humanities. Colleges need to make a more compelling case for liberal arts education and then make sure they are delivering what they promise.

Today, the bipartisan [Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences](#), under the auspices of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, is issuing a report that makes all this very clear.

Science and society

As two members of the commission who authored the report, we are both strong advocates for science and technology, but we believe that the social sciences and humanities are critical components of a 21st century education — and a sound investment in our collective future. They are part of the main act.

To realize their potential, expanded public-private collaboration is the critical element for success. We need to make this model a reality. We urge members of Congress to read the report and realize how much their constituents from all walks of life have gained from the social sciences and humanities and how much they need them going forward.

Science is essential — but science alone cannot make the tough decisions that impact us as humans.

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