Good morning.

I’d like to thank Rich, David, and their colleagues at CIC for the invitation to speak with you today. It’s privilege to share the podium with my colleagues in philanthropy and to address such a distinguished group of dedicated educators.

I’d like to begin, if I might, with a scary story. Halloween is only a few weeks away—just around the corner if the convenience store decorations in my neighborhood are any indication!

My scary story is about the state of the humanities. After all, if we are to believe the steady drumbeat of news articles, opinion surveys, and op-eds, then we are—almost certainly—witnessing the death throes of the humanities and qualitative social sciences.

The numbers of majors in these disciplines continue to decline. Faculty FTEs are steadily reallocated to the STEM disciplines or to preprofessional programs. Job openings for newly minted humanities PhDs are almost non-existent.

Surely, we’re in the final days. The end must be just up ahead. I’m not certain what comes next—after the apocalypse, I mean. A world without history, story-telling, art making, interpretation, or meaning, I suppose.

I don’t mean to be flippant. But sometimes the rhetoric of decline and fall is so ubiquitous, the sense of impending doom so enveloping, the terminal prognosis so... inescapable... that it’s hard not to laugh a little, to think, “Could it really be so bad?”

The truth, of course, for some of us, does seem “that bad.” When students and resources flow away from the fields about which we care so passionately, to which we have devoted years of study and professional effort, it is painful—not just in the abstract, but personally.

I remember when I was president of a small arts university in Philadelphia: I approved the reallocation of a faculty position from ceramics to illustration. Art school students today are increasingly seeking out programs that more clearly feed into thriving professions—like illustration, animation, product design.

Ceramics—a field with a distinguished history and storied reputation at the university, a program that produced sensitive artists and outstanding, beautiful, provocative work—did not have such a clear professional path after college. As a result, it grew smaller, less visible, and even less likely to attract students in the future.

(Does this story sound familiar? If not, just substitute English or classics for ceramics and economics or business or health professions for illustration.)

The outcome is indeed something to grieve over. And my chair of the crafts department did grieve. And his grief was something with which to empathize. And I did: I played the role of
the compassionate but unyielding administrator, but I myself felt deeply angry and sad about the diminution of ceramics at the university.

But it is critical to remember what the chair and I were grieving about. It wasn’t—in my opinion—the death of ceramics as an art form—or, to return to the subject at hand, the humanities as a field of endeavor. Rather, it’s the shifting of institutional priorities to reflect changing student (and—let’s be honest—parental) goals and aspirations.

And it’s tough to blame them, especially given the rising cost of higher education and the growing debt burden taken on by families. Employability does matter—and, for families less familiar with less visible and more esoteric seeming fields like ceramics and Classics, it’s not a surprise that there’s pressure on students to choose the majors that seem to promise the greatest likelihood of post-graduation employment.

Still, knowing all of this, these shifts in institutional priorities are painful. And they’re regrettable too—at least for an old humanistically inclined educator like me.

But—stepping back for a moment—we also have to admit to ourselves that the institutional diminution of humanities disciplines and departments is not the same as the death of the humanities. And the fact that we sometimes confuse the two is a sign that the humanities have become disconnected in our thinking from life, from the world outside the academy. We’ve come to consider the humanities co-terminous with the departmental structures and academic disciplines where those modes of thinking have been accommodated in academia.

And that’s a problem: we, some of the most articulate and capable spokespeople and practitioners of the humanities and qualitative social sciences, have restricted our focus to the institutional context within which we work. We’re speaking from the academy to the academy about the academy.

It’s important to do so: we have an obligation to engage the context we inhabit. But it means that we don’t always address ourselves to the humanities and social sciences as they’re practiced and used outside of the academy. And, as a result, we fail both to understand how they’re practiced and used and to speak meaningfully about them outside the academy.

Meanwhile, I think the humanities are thriving outside of universities—not everywhere equally, of course, but, still, I would say thriving.

(Of course, they’re not always called by that name. “Humanities” may not be the best branding for what it is that we’re concerned with; I don’t have a better idea, but I know that that word doesn’t always resonate outside of college seminar rooms—even as humanistic activity goes on and humanistic values and approaches are prized.)

I’ve had the privilege over the last two years of spending time in Indian Country, as the Luce Foundation has sought to develop a new initiative to support indigenous intellectual
leaders. I’ve met Native people working to recover and reintroduce languages pronounced dead. I’ve met artists adapting traditional techniques to contemporary practice. I’ve met lawyers and politicians using historical ethnographies to establish land claims and water rights.

These people are practicing the humanities. They’re conducting historical research and ethnography. They’re engaged in critical analysis and interpretation. They’re making meaning from texts and objects, inventing or reconstructing stories that are meaningful to their lives as individuals and communities.

And they can use the help of scholars based in academic institutions. An Anishinaabe elder, for example, perhaps the last person in his community to know the traditional funerary ritual, partnered with a graduate student at the University of Minnesota to record, translate, annotate, and publish that ritual so that it would not be lost to future generations.

Just last week, at the American Philosophical Society, I learned about APS’s Center for Native American and Indigenous Research. CNAIR has digitized its wax cylinder recording made by anthropoids and linguists conducting field work in Native communities. These recordings are being used to teach “lost” languages within indigenous communities.

These are the humanities and social sciences as lived and practiced outside the university. These are the humanities and social sciences as tools of sovereignty, of community, of resilience. And these are the humanities and social sciences as they are understood and used in a practical way—not only throughout Indian Country but in countless communities and places across the country and globe.

What does all of this have to do with the Luce Foundation’s work on behalf of and with higher education? We continue to support humanistic and social scientific scholarship in the fields of Asian studies, religion and theology, and American art. (I should also note that we continue to support STEM education and research through our Clare Boothe Luce Program.)

But we also continue—consistent with the vision and commitment of our founder, Henry R. Luce, the creator of Time and Life magazines—to encourage the dissemination of that scholarship outside of the academy: to policymakers, to practitioners of various kinds, to communities that can make use of the knowledge, insights, and strategies produced by researchers working inside academe.

Our higher education program, for which I have responsibility, has, especially, sought to encourage dialogue and exchange between the academic humanities and social sciences and communities and constituencies outside the university.

We have sought to do so in several ways. First, by encouraging innovative approaches to doctoral education. We’ve tried to go beyond important but more familiar “alt-ac” initiatives that aim to broaden students’ professional horizons and equip them with practical skills in order to improve their job prospects.
Instead, we’ve tried to invest in projects that reimagine what the humanities PhD could be for, how it could be used. A grant to UC, Merced, for instance, supports a multi-semester sequence in community-engaged research. It will prepare students to conduct research in collaboration with communities and then enable them to carry out such research and present it publicly in forms ranging from exhibitions to policy recommendations. The first sequence will focus on the theme “Cultural Preservation and Social Change” and will involve community partners including the Merced City Council, the County Arts Council, and the Downtown Neighborhood Association.

Emory University, with a grant from the Luce Foundation’s higher education program, is undertaking a similar project. But Emory doctoral students partner with students in the University’s master in development studies program to prepare for a summer placement outside the US. There, working with an NGO, they will use their deep knowledge of culture, history, and society to contribute to the organizations’ work in communities.

Finally, the University of Delaware has launched an entirely new doctoral program, aimed at preparing experts in African American studies for public humanities careers. This program, which recruits students through the English, history, and history of art PhD programs, signals to students from day one that public engagement and service—outside the university—can be not only the outcome but the purpose of doctoral education. It has attracted students who seek positions in museums and research libraries but also those with a much expansive conception of engagement, including film, political activism, and direct service.

Another group of grants have focused more directly on disseminating scholarship. American University’s history department sought a grant to fit out a step truck with high-tech and low-tech equipment. The truck will support humanities projects undertaken by faculty and students in partnership with Washington, DC neighborhoods and organizations. The AU Humanities Truck made its debut at Adams-Morgan Day—a neighborhood celebration—where an exhibition of photographs by a community-based photographer was exhibited on site inside the truck. Future projects to document the history of a homeless shelter and to map gentrifying neighborhoods will be undertaken on site using the Truck as a mobile lab.

The Pardee RAND Graduate School used a Luce higher education grant to include more humanities scholars in its Faculty Leaders Program. Aimed at less well-resourced institutions, the FLP is a boot camp for faculty who want to translate their research into policy. Scholars from history, women’s studies, urban and ethnic studies, and more spend a week with RAND policy experts learning how to reframe academic research in ways that will render it more accessible and relevant to policy makers.

The last group of grants seeks to support projects that are redefining what humanistic research looks like. At the Harvard Art Museums, a small grant supported a summer seminar for faculty and doctoral students working on material culture. In this seminar though, participants worked closely with artisans and other skilled workers to learn,
through practice, how certain objects are made and how the process of making is a way of understanding the meaning of objects.

Columbia’s Making and Knowing Project is another example of this kind of work. In some ways a traditional academic endeavor—the production of a scholarly edition of an unpublished medieval craftsman’s book of secrets—the Making and Knowing Project re-conceives how such an endeavor ought to be carried out.

Graduate and undergraduate students use experimentation to validate the “recipes” recorded by the anonymous craftsperson. They’re literally wearing googles and lab coats, working in a decommissioned chemistry lab surrounded by Bunsen burners and tubes and vials. Their experiments become the basis of detailed “footnotes”—featuring images and video—that will be incorporated into the digital edition of the manuscript. These footnotes are reviewed not only by humanities scholars but also by scientists and craftspeople with relevant expertise. The end result will not only be a multimedia research resource but also a distinctive model of humanistic scholarship that relies on collaboration, experimentation, and a willingness to traverse far-flung disciplinary terrain.

These are a few of the grants the Luce Foundation’s higher education program has awarded in recent years. Taken together, they demonstrate our belief in the continuing importance of humanistic and social scientific research—and, perhaps more to the point, our commitment to the idea that colleges and universities—whatever the state of undergraduate enrollments in humanities majors—have a critical role to play in nourishing the humanities as they are lived and practiced in communities across the nation and the globe.

You’ll have observed that many—most—of the grants I mentioned are to larger research universities. And it’s true that, because of our focus on doctoral education and de-emphasis of undergraduate education as a grantmaking priority, we provide more of our money to research institutions.

But I believe that liberal arts colleges and non-doctoral universities are enormously important to the humanistic project. Not only because of their work providing a liberal education to undergraduates, but because they constitute a network—spread throughout every state, in urban, suburban, and rural communities—a network of centers of humanistic values, resources, research, and insight.

They are embedded in communities with deep ties to community organizations, local leaders, neighborhoods, and families. They have the potential—indeed, in most cases, it’s more than potential, it’s action—to provide communities access to the humanities and social sciences. This kind of work is precisely what we support as a foundation and, more important, it’s the kind of work that’s needed if the humanities are to continue to survive and thrive.