I am often asked why the education reports of 1983—including *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education—had the impact they did on the American public. My answer is that the reports did not create the national concern about education. The national concern about education created the reports.

The reports simply reflected and reinforced a growing national consensus that something needed to be done about schooling in America. This consensus has created a situation that, by themselves, neither the federal government, nor the states, nor the education profession could have brought about: it has given us the first real opportunity in nearly three decades to seek major and, if our hopes are realized, lasting reforms in our schools. The current national debate about what we teach and how we go about it is far from over, and the outcome will shape American education’s agenda for years to come.

The humanities need desperately to be heard in this debate. There is at present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to assert their significance and to influence the course of the reform movement, to secure and in some cases recapture the place of the humanities in the education of our young people. I suspect it will be another generation—perhaps longer—before such an opportunity presents itself again.

This opportunity comes at a time when the condition of the humanities in our schools and colleges demands serious attention. A few years ago the Commission on the Humanities warned that “Surveying America today, many would argue that the humanities are in crisis and would describe this crisis as symptomatic of a general weakening of our vision and resolve.” (See *The Humanities in American Life*, Report of the Commission on the Humanities, 1980, p. 3.) A more recent study of the humanities in our schools adds that the “corruption, abandonment, and disintegration of these studies in recent years can only be cause for alarm.” (See *Against Mediocrity*, ed. by Chester E. Finn, Jr., Diane Ravitch, and Robert T. Fancher, New York, 1984, p. 5.) And the humanities in higher education are apparently not faring much better. William Bennett asserts that “What we have on many of our campuses is an unclaimed legacy, a course of studies in which the humanities have been siphoned off, diluted, or so adulterated that students graduate knowing little of their heritage.” (See William J. Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy*, National Endowment for the Humanities, November 1984, p. 1.)

This state of affairs is not without its ironies. The humanities were, after all, once at the core of the high school and the college curricula—and for excellent reasons. Literature, history, languages, philosophy—these and related disciplines, along with the fine arts, make up the great cultural stream of humane learning that constitutes our most precious legacy. The humanities are animated by the urge to understand human beings in all their complexity and contradictions, their capacity for pain and pleasure, their potential for good and evil, their instinct for play, and their thirst for meaning and purpose. They connect us to our past, linking us to what other human beings have thought and felt and believed and suffered in the process of finding their own humanity.

But the humanities not only connect us to our cultural heritage; they also hold out the potential of connecting everything in our experience. They help us make sense of the sometimes conflicting, sometimes frustrating, sometimes pleasurable events we encounter each day. They offer us the experience of wholeness because they touch us at the deepest levels of mind and personality. They are inclusive disciplines, helping us to create larger and more comprehensive meaning out of the fragmentariness of everyday life. In the broadest sense, they are devoted to the task, as one scholar puts it, of “discovering what it means to be human.”

Yet, despite their self-evident significance, the humanities are not given a central place in America’s schools. Humanists and others similarly concerned have complained that this situation reflects the low esteem in which American society holds these disciplines and that the extent of this neglect can be seen in the education reports of the past few years. The tenor of these complaints is well expressed by Richard Lyman, president of the Rockefeller Foundation. In speaking of the plight of the humanities in higher education, he raises a plaintive question. Why, he asks, does it seem that the humanities must constantly defend their right to exist and flourish in these United States? In what other country is there a new commission on the humanities every few years, justifying the existence over and over again
The Humanities

of fields of knowledge one might imagine would scarcely need justification—languages, literature, history, and philosophy? (See Richard Lyman, "Drinking at the Mirage," Columbia Magazine, November 1983, p. 35.)

Lyman offers a number of reasons for this situation, among them the practical and democratic tendencies of American society, which encourage people to value the so-called "hard" sciences and to suspect the humanities of being elitist. Thus, over the course of this century, the physical and social sciences have attracted an increasing share of financial support, public approval and prestige. And the humanities, which were once at the center of the curriculum, have been edged steadily toward the periphery.

If the humanities have lost ground in our schools and colleges during the past century, however, it should be noted that not all the responsibility lies with the utilitarian and populist tendencies in our national character. Part also rests with the humanities themselves, with what they have claimed—and not claimed—for themselves as disciplines and as modes of thought.

Mortimer Adler tells us in The Paideia Proposal that the Latin word humanitas—from which our term "humanities" is derived—did not mean a specific set of disciplines but something much broader: "the general learning that should be the possession of all human beings." Thus, the humanities are concerned with the knowledge and skills we must acquire and the ultimate questions we must address if we are to live as complete human beings.

We have somehow lost sight of this broad and comprehensive definition of the humanities, and the consequences have been serious. In fact it seems to me that the gravest problem facing the humanities is not inadequate funding or an unappreciative public, significant as these difficulties are. It is that we have somehow allowed the humanities to be defined too narrowly, as if they were indistinguishable from any other discipline in the curriculum. We describe them as discrete disciplines, as specialized and insulated as all the others. And by doing so, we encourage the tendency to set them apart from all other disciplines when we should instead be seeking to reconcile them with other fields of knowledge.

This tendency to isolate the humanities from other intellectual endeavors is especially evident when the humanities are pitted against science—as if they represented two irreconcilable ways of knowing and understanding. In reality, of course, the sciences and the humanities are in many respects complementary and supplementary. Each helps us understand our world and ourselves. Each illuminates the other, and when the light from one casts a shadow on the other, we should remember that light and shadow require one another for either to have meaning.

But they work in different ways, and the specialization that has worked so spectacularly for science has been far less beneficial to the humanities, especially in their teaching of them. What is so surprising is that humanists, instead of resisting the tendency to insulate their disciplines, sometimes seem to embrace it. Specialization is not merely accepted; it appears to be eagerly sought. Unfortunately, in trying to make themselves just like every other discipline—and especially like the more empirically inclined ones—the humanities diminish their significance and obscure their essence. We are losing what the late philosopher Charles Frankel described as the essence of humanistic knowledge—"the human voice behind what is being said."

It is fundamentally important that the humanities not be isolated or cut off in the way I have described. It is especially critical now, when the humanities have the chance to broaden and deepen their influence in the schools and in the lives of our students.

What can be done?

First, we need to think about the humanities in terms of their broad humanizing role in education, not just as narrow disciplinary pigeonholes.

If the humanities are to be involved with ultimate issues, with what is essential for human beings to know, then they must be connected to the larger problems and broader movements of our times.

This concept suggests the need to foster the relationship between humanistic studies and other kinds of learning. For example, contemporary society cannot be understood outside the context of science and technology and their effect on the human condition.

Science and technology have altered human life in profound and far-reaching ways, and they will do so even more in the future than they have done in the past. They have given us a perspective on the universe that has become an integral, if often unconscious, part of the fabric of our lives. The electron microscope, to mention one example, has opened up an extraordinary and beautiful world that was formerly closed to us. So has the linear accelerator. So also will the telescopes we will soon be building, telescopes so powerful that they promise to reveal more definite information about the creation of our universe than was ever thought possible through empirical means.

These and other advances in scientific knowledge have raised monumental questions of ethics and morality. Do we have the right to create new forms of life? How can we productively engage our capacity for prolonging human life and diminishing human suffering? How can we commit to peaceful purposes the power of the atom, instead of allowing that power to paralyze us with fear for our very existence? How can we use space and share the oceans to benefit rather than worsen the human condition?

It is not possible simply to impose a humanistic perspective on these questions; it requires instead a complementary understanding of science and the humanities to sift through the variables that make these questions so difficult to answer—and for that matter so difficult even to ask intelligently. Students graduating from our schools and colleges should have made the connection between science and the humanities so that the one informs the other, each contributing in its own way to the completeness of view and wholeness of perspective needed for comprehension.

We need to recognize, then, that recent advances in science and the profound questions science has raised touch the humanities every bit as much as developments in philosophy or literature or art. If the humanities are to play as meaningful a role today as they have
historically, humanities scholars need to engage themselves with what science and technology have told us about our world and about ourselves.

One example of the approach I believe is needed comes from the University of Utah, where I spent ten years as president. As part of the undergraduate honors program, the University of Utah offers a five-quarter, lower-division course that provides students with a perspective on the intellectual development of Western civilization. It does so by integrating the study of science and the study of the humanities. The course is taught by two professors, one a scientist and one a humanist. The reading list consists only of original sources, and both professors attend all the classes, read all the assigned material, review most of the students’ written work together, and plan the course jointly. One version of the course takes as its unifying theme the relationship between scientific thought and society’s views on such matters as epistemology, ethics, politics, and religion. Students are asked to explore some interesting questions: Could Thomas Hobbes have written The Leviathan without the stimulus of Renaissance science? What would we call the Enlightenment have been possible without Newton? What scientific assumptions underlie medieval religious thought? What does Dante’s universe owe to Hellenistic science?

Just as important, students are encouraged to look at science and the humanities not as mutually exclusive activities but as complementary intellectual endeavors that have something to say to each other. This experience is often as vivid for the professors as for the students, because it requires scientists and humanists to step out of their customary and comfortable roles and to look at their own field through the lens of another.

This example is drawn from the university level, because that is the one with which I am most familiar. But students should not have to wait until their university studies to acquire an understanding of the “connectedness” of science and the humanities and how each affects the other, or of connections between the humanities and virtually everything else they study. Students in the schools need to acquire an appreciation of these relationships and a base of knowledge about them irrespective of whether they enter the work force out of high school or pursue further study. Several years ago, the Commission on the Humanities described a society that values the humanities as capable of producing citizens who “can use their scientific and technical achievements responsibly because they see the connections among science, technology, and humanity.” (See The Humanities in American Life, p. 3.) It is time we take this aspiration more seriously and encourage our schools to take it more seriously as well.

Second, we need to strengthen not only the connections among disciplines but also those between levels of education. There is growing recognition of the need to forge stronger links between the teaching of the humanities in our elementary and secondary schools and in our colleges and universities. The University of California sponsors several promising efforts in that direction, among them the CLIO Project, a joint effort on the part of the Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley and the California State Department of Education to improve the teaching of history in the schools. One of the most encouraging developments in this area has been the work of the National Endowment for the Humanities, whose willingness to involve itself in the welfare of the humanities in the schools is both welcome and timely.

We need to approach these joint ventures not as temporary arrangements but as long-term partnerships, a lesson we learned from the reforms undertaken a quarter of a century ago in response to Sputnik. This effort will surely involve revising some long-held attitudes—especially on the part of higher education, which has generally tended to hold itself aloof from the problems of the schools. But there are welcome signs that a new spirit of cooperation is building. We should do everything we can to encourage it.

It is also good news that other kinds of barriers are diminishing. The Council of Chief State School Officers recently recommended, among other things, that state education agencies work with their state humanities councils to encourage cooperation on projects that involve elementary and secondary schools. The CCSSO also recommended that each state develop a specific set of policies to further instruction in the humanities and “the establishment of a core of common learning to which the humanities are central.” (See Humanities and State Education Agencies, Council of Chief State School Officers, no date, p. 7.)

One of the most important opportunities we have, in fact, is the chance to take a hard look at what we teach at all levels and why. The fragmentation of the humanities reflects the fragmentation of the high school curriculum generally, the loss of a shared sense of what students should know. This problem, I might add, is hardly limited to secondary education. Clark Kerr and William Bennett, among others, have documented the same problem of fragmentation and loss of focus at the college level as well.

Finally, we must work at reinvigorating our sense of the future. I include in that not only the humanities but education generally. The past ten or fifteen years have not been easy ones for education at any level. Financial constraints, public criticism, and pervasive curricular disarray have taken their toll. Low morale and diminished self-confidence have tended to reinforce the negative elements in our collective environment. Perhaps to some extent we have made our problems worse by expecting so little. Nevertheless, we should not feel hopeless about the future.

I am convinced that the conditions of contemporary life make education more important, not less, and that the same is true for the humanities. But it is up to humanists and to those who value humanistic knowledge to make the most of the two great opportunities before us—the opportunity to bring about real, lasting, and vigorous reform in our schools and the opportunity to see that the humanities are a strong and persuasive voice in that movement.

[This article is adapted from an address presented to the California Council for the Humanities, a branch of the National Endowment for the Humanities.]

DAVID PIERPONT GARDNER is president of the University of California system. He chaired the National Commission on Excellence in Education when it issued its report, A Nation at Risk.

NATIONAL FORUM 11

*Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, a multidisciplinary quarterly magazine that enlightens, challenges and entertains its diverse readers, serves as a general-interest publication as well as a platform for The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi. The award-winning publication was founded in 1915 and has a circulation of more than 100,000. It’s the flagship publication of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, the nation’s oldest and most-selective all-discipline honor society. With chapters at more than 300 college campuses across the country, Phi Kappa Phi was founded in 1897 at the University of Maine and upwards of 1.25 million members spanning the academic disciplines have been initiated since the Society's inception. To read more about the magazine and Society, go online to www.phikappaphi.org.