



BOLD ACTION FOR STRENGTH AND GROWTH

The American Council of Learned Societies
Strategic Framework 2025-2030



American Council of
Learned Societies

**STRATEGIC
FRAMEWORK
2025–2030:
BOLD
ACTION FOR
STRENGTH
AND GROWTH**

MESSAGE FROM ACLS PRESIDENT JOY CONNOLLY



For over a century, ACLS has worked to sustain the study of human experience and endeavor organized in the academic fields we call the humanities and the social sciences.

Since that time, the social and technological contexts for this study have changed considerably. Many of these changes have been for the good, and no one would ever choose to turn the clock back: the American academic community is much more diverse than it was in 1919, scholars are better connected across international borders, access to research and knowledge has improved through online networks and libraries, and the material we study is much broader in scope. But the professionalization of academic practice, the rapid development of information technology, and the evolution of education in the American imagination from being a public good to a private one are among the developments that have fundamentally altered the relationship between higher education and the public.

In recent years, the foundation of public trust and investment that anchored the growth of the humanities and social sciences in American colleges and universities has begun to erode.

Now, in the spring of 2025, the consequences of this long-term erosion are being exacerbated by an aggressive presidential administration that makes no secret that it views higher education as an enemy.

Academic freedom and the integrity of campus governance are under threat. The framework for a united defense is slowly taking shape, but fear continues to grow along with police presence on campus and the arrests of student activists.

Whatever the future brings, ACLS is working energetically along three paths that we have designed to help build short-term confidence and long-term strength.

First, we intend to speak with a stronger voice both to our long-standing academic constituencies and to audiences outside academia. We plan to augment our communications staff and to engage our well-informed, dynamic program staff, as well as our community of society leaders, fellows and grantees, and reviewers into the collective work of telling a bold story about the crucial necessity of humanistic inquiry in a polarized and distracted world.

Second: coalition-building. We are joining groups with solid histories of organizing for higher education like the American Council of Education, where we will advance the experiences and needs of humanistic fields to the table. Having deepened our relationships with our member societies and other allies over the past five years, we seek now to channel our collective energies into alignment through an array of activities meant to strengthen and amplify the benefits of our collective fields. We're also building new relationships, bringing the humanistic perspective to projects and associations dedicated to the sciences, public policy, and professional fields like law and architecture. All of this work builds on the strength and reach of the ACLS member societies—a foundational strata of higher education upon which we will continue to build.

Third, we will make the most of our identity as a long-time supporter of scholarship and a constructive voice for positive change to call on scholars to rebuild public trust. Trust will not emerge just because we say it must. We need to work for it, by re-orienting our professional habits in ways that allow us to direct our time and energy to reaching out past familiar terrain, to change how we create knowledge and how we circulate it.

Students, parents, professional people who may themselves have majored in the humanities and social sciences but who now encourage their children to focus on STEM and professional degrees; community members who have never felt welcome in the local college or museum; trustees who focus solely on financial projections and view faculty as an odd and difficult bunch; high school teachers and public librarians: building relationships with these and other groups demands more than better public relations. We must determine together how to connect with communities beyond the ones now familiar to us, encouraged by the fact that many Americans are deeply interested in history, religion, ethics, political institutions, social values, literature, art, and music. This interest is a strong platform on which to build support for free humanistic inquiry.

We're well positioned for this work. From 2020 to 2024, guided by our first-ever strategic plan, ACLS pursued a strategy of expansion. We expanded our communities of scholars and the types of scholarly effort served by our fellowship and grants programs. We also expanded our scope to bring ACLS into the community of problem solvers, together with many member societies and an array of national organizations. We have sought to help make academia a place with more porous walls, where creative, inclusive excellence is consistently rewarded, where faculty and humanistic administrators are empowered to work together, where expert knowledge is viewed as the shared property of all.

This document looks different from our first strategic plan. That's our intention! In an atmosphere where uncertainty is the norm, we chose to articulate a framework of values

and priorities rather than a list of projects that might require rapid modification. As we aim to be prepared for anything, as our final objective declares, we will use this framework as a guide and an accountability check.

I will retain just one formal element of our first plan: Gwendolyn Brooks' emboldening exhortation to "live in the along" in her great poem "Speech to the Young: Speech to the Progress-Toward."

Say to them,
say to the down-keepers,
the sun-slappers,
the self-soilers,
the harmony-hushers,
"Even if you are not ready for day
it cannot always be night."
You will be right.
For that is the hard home-run.
Live not for battles won.
Live not for the-end-of-the-song.
Live in the along.

I have always seen scholarship as an act of service to humanity – an act of love and hope for the better future that will grow out of our understanding of the present and the past. Scholarship is an intrinsic and instrumental good that advances the human community.

I am deeply excited and honored to lead ACLS, lifted up by the brilliant scholars and activists on behalf of knowledge who have paved the way for us. Our mission feels ever more urgent and pressing. I thank my talented, dedicated colleagues, the wise members of the Board, and our large and diverse community of scholars, fellows, reviewers, funders, donors, and friends. Dialogue with you sustains me. Please feel free to contact me at president@acsls.org.

Forward, with confidence!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joy", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Joy Connolly

RATORS

ACCREDITATIONS/

DOE

TRANSPARENCY

FACULTY

NEWED
USE OF
PURPOSE

DEEPER
ENGAGEMENT
IN
GOVERNANCE

MORE ACCURATE
PICTURE
OF HIGHER
ED

MEDIA

COVERAG

MANIFESTO

HIGHER ED
ASSOCIATION
LEADERS

STRONGER
COLLABORATIONS

RICHER
COMMUNITY +
PRIDE IN THE
SECTOR

LOCAL
COMMUNITY
MEMBERS



MISSION

ACLS is dedicated to advancing the creation and circulation of knowledge about humanity and human endeavor, past and present. In a world full of challenges, we advocate for the right to pursue knowledge freely; we fund outstanding scholars and scholarship in the humanities and social sciences; we build and support communities that transcend boundaries and borders of all kinds; we promote conditions and policies that help all scholars thrive.

WHO WE ARE

Since 1919, ACLS has been dedicated to promoting, supporting, and advocating for the humanities and social sciences on the strength of our core beliefs: knowledge is a public good and inquiry into the full range of human thought and endeavor cultivates the understanding and habits of thought necessary to create a better present and future for all. Our member societies serve thousands of scholars in a broad range of fields across the United States and around the world. We provide a trusted meeting place for these societies, for our coalitions of member institutions and organizations, for the hundreds of scholars who participate in our programs each year, and for others who value our mission. We secure and distribute philanthropic funding and work collaboratively to advocate for our fields and for conditions in which knowledge and learning thrive.

VISION

Our goal is to catalyze the re-centering of humanistic knowledge in academia and in society at large as a force for mutual understanding, the enrichment of individual lives, democratic participation, and better stewardship of our planet. We aim to gather and increase resources for humanistic knowledge in the forms of community-building, the sharing of strategies and best practices, and funding.

We seek a world where inquiry into human thought and endeavor is central to the missions of colleges and universities and valued as a public good. In this world, the community embraces a plurality of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, which is essential for excellence; study and debate proceed freely without fear or censorship; academic societies and institutions of higher education recognize and reward the full range of work that constitutes meaningful contributions to scholarship. Believing that knowledge is produced everywhere, across the arts and sciences, off campus as well as on campus, in all nations, we seek to dissolve the intellectual and professional walls and hierarchies that hinder free inquiry.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

SPEAK OUT

Become an ever-stronger voice for the humanities and social sciences

PROMOTE

Reward ingenuity, quality, and brilliance in the production and circulation of knowledge

TRANSFORM

Catalyze change in academic practice and culture that strengthens the place and resonance of the humanities and social sciences

BE READY FOR ANYTHING

Increase our ability to adapt to changing conditions, threats, and needs



I. SPEAK OUT

Become an ever-stronger voice for the humanities and social sciences

Many people in the United States care deeply about the knowledge produced and studied in the fields we call “the humanities and social sciences.” But a mix of long-standing and new challenges threaten funding for teaching and scholarship undermining or erasing entire fields of study. As the only organization representing the full range of disciplines and interdisciplinary areas across the humanities and social sciences, ACLS sees opportunities to employ our voices and take collective action to champion our fields.

We commit to amplifying the stories of scholars, academic societies, and institutions, focusing on the audiences where we see the potential to make the greatest impact. We will gather and circulate models of success and spread the word about strategies to secure a future where humanistic knowledge is meaningful and accessible to a broad audience. We believe in collaboration and coalition-building. Our first stop in this work is always our member societies: we serve both to amplify their efforts and to organize action. Our next stop is organizations in the sciences, professional schools, and national groups with whom we share common cause.

- Write and engage in action on behalf of academic freedom, the integrity of scholarship and academic governance, and the proven value of a diverse professoriate
- Work with our own constituencies and other organizations to create or expand coalitions that advocate inside and outside academia on behalf of humanistic fields and the liberal arts more broadly
- Heighten awareness of the achievements of member societies and our community of scholars to academic leadership, policy makers, media, and other influential networks
- Intensify collaborative efforts with colleges and universities to strengthen research, teaching, and leadership in the humanities and social sciences

II. PROMOTE

Reward ingenuity, quality, and brilliance in the production and circulation of knowledge

The pursuit of knowledge takes time and resources. From its early years, recognizing financial awards as important instruments that make research possible and that draw attention to excellence, ACLS has funded outstanding scholars. Over the years, our awards have advanced an increasingly diverse group of scholars, measured by demographics, institutional affiliation, and national citizenship. Our grantmaking has expanded to include open access publishing, collaborative work, professional development, field-building, public humanities, and disciplinary problem solving.

In the coming five years, we will redouble our efforts to seek external funding for a wide range of activities, with special attention to collaborative teams; projects that surmount institutional barriers and national borders; and work that connects academic expertise in the humanities and social sciences with the worlds of public policy, science, law, architecture, and urban studies. We will also seek to assess how our grantmaking may best meet the needs of fields, institutions, and individual scholars.

- Carry out and refine peer-reviewed fellowship and grant programs grounded in our mission and values
- Expand support for people producing knowledge in a wide variety of institutions, outside the academy, and in global networks
- Support fieldbuilding that responds to public needs and interests
- Build, nurture, and connect networks of scholars, within and across institutions, fields and borders of all kinds, including national borders

III. TRANSFORM

Catalyze change in academic practice and culture that strengthens the place and resonance of the humanities and social sciences

Scholarship doesn't take place in a vacuum: it is shaped by institutional and political context. In the case of humanistic inquiry, a complex tapestry of policy and culture sustains undergraduate and graduate curricula and norms for scholarship and other faculty activities. The attacks on academic freedom at the state and federal level, the politicization of knowledge, financial models of libraries and presses, the walls separating the production of knowledge on campus and off: all these things affect academic practice.

At a moment when many scholars and organizations are seeking to evolve and expand the reach of their work through public engagement and other methods, we see the opportunity to identify shared needs and goals across humanistic fields and beyond. We are well placed to collaborate with other similarly invested organizations.

- Convene communities around proven practices and approaches toward a “new academy” that rewards scholars and administrators seeking to grow our fields and create a healthy environment for inquiry using the full range of methods of circulating knowledge
- Advance doctoral education reform that better serves students, academia, and society
- Collaborate with those who publish and otherwise disseminate scholarship to ensure its reach to broad audiences
- Identify and promote institutional policies and culture that foster growth in the academic humanities and social sciences

IV. BE READY FOR ANYTHING

Increase our ability to adapt to changing conditions, threats, and needs

Founded by 10 of our member societies over a century ago, ACLS has found ways to increase our reach and impact by successfully adapting to changing conditions, including the Second World War, cold wars, cultural revolutions, and periods of severe economic precarity.

In the spring of 2025, the future for higher education is difficult to predict. With good academic values as our north star, we commit to being efficient and effective in how we govern ourselves and how we determine and conduct our operations, including all meetings and convenings. Our priority is to be ambitious, inventive, collaborative, and accountable in work that is of concrete value for our constituencies. Our ability to be resilient when faced with abrupt change requires careful stewardship of our endowment and our relationships with funding partners and our constituents.

- Review and revise our governance
- Assess organizational structure and operations and make improvements where needed
- Strengthen our financial sustainability by diversifying our sources of funding
- Respond to the needs of member societies and institutions and assist in their efforts to thrive and make a greater impact
- Ensure that our convenings are timely and responsive to the needs of our community



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In developing this strategic framework, ACLS consulted with a broad variety of constituent groups, supporters, and peers. We are grateful to all of those who shared their insights and feedback on how ACLS can best contribute to building a solid and sustainable future for humanistic knowledge.

We are especially grateful to the select members of the following groups who provided specific inputs in the development of this work:

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