

Miami Herald

Posted on Wed, Jun. 19, 2013

Shalala, Padron: Humanities, social sciences for a vibrant, competitive, secure nation

BY EDUARDO PADRÓN AND DONNA SHALALA

Humanitiescommission.org



MCT / MCT

300 dpi Rick Nease illustration of a divided America being stitched together. (The Detroit Free Press/MCT)

Our national dialogue on higher education places much emphasis, and rightly so, on college graduates' "employability." With the rising cost of attending a college causing families to take on greater financial debt, many weigh the merits of a college degree by its potential return on investment as measured in future wages.

Our national economy, security and sustainability depend on a well-rounded and robust higher education system that is more than the sum of its parts. Beyond the substantial differential in earnings that people with college degrees enjoy (higher qualifications = higher pay), a quality education offers significant benefits not readily measured in dollars and cents.

On one hand, a college education teaches focus. Students choose a particular discipline and career track, and that preparation gets them in the door of that prized first job. But a college degree also provides a broader toolkit of skills and understandings — about oneself and the world we share — that allows each graduate to successfully navigate the

inevitable societal and workforce changes.

That toolkit includes the intellectual flexibility and social development that fosters collaboration with people in different fields and from diverse cultures. Our graduates need to be resourceful and innovative, making connections between disparate ideas and communicating this new knowledge so others can understand and benefit.

And where do these traits of nimbleness, receptivity and reciprocity come from?

They are made possible through those life lessons that can only be imparted by an education enriched by the humanities and social sciences. The study of literature, history, anthropology, sociology, political science and the arts introduces students to those wide-ranging principles that have guided and strengthened societies around the globe.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences' bipartisan Commission on Humanities & Social Sciences was charged by Congress to find innovative ways for the United States to maintain national excellence in the humanities and social sciences. This national two-year effort engaged government, schools and universities, cultural institutions, businesses and philanthropic organizations in seeking ways to support and strengthen these vital areas of knowledge.

The commission's final report released today is entitled "The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a vibrant, competitive and secure nation" (available at www.amacad.org). The report identifies three goals for advancing the humanities and social sciences in America:

- Educate Americans in the knowledge, skills and understanding they will need to thrive in a 21st-century democracy by supporting literacy, preparing citizens for their civic responsibilities, increasing access to online resources and engaging the public through partnerships and networks that bring people together.
- Foster a society that is innovative, competitive and strong by increasing investment in research and discovery; communicating the importance of research to the public; creating cohesive curricula to ensure basic competencies; strengthening support for teachers; and encouraging all disciplines to address such "Grand Challenges" as the provision of clean air and water, food, health, energy and universal education.
- Equip the nation for leadership in an interconnected world by promoting language learning; expanding education in international affairs and transnational studies; supporting study abroad and international exchange programs; and developing a "Culture Corps" to ensure that social and cultural expertise is transmitted to new generations.

A better-educated America is a stronger America. One look at the rapidly changing world around us makes clear that if we are to prosper as a nation — with justice and civil liberties firmly rooted in democratic principles — we must ensure that the humanities and social sciences have their rightful place in education.

Eduardo J. Padrón, president of Miami Dade College, and Donna E. Shalala, president of the University of Miami, are members of the Commission on Humanities & Social Sciences.