Preface

In the spring of 2019, as I was concluding a two-year term as a senior fellow at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, I was invited to deliver the Malcolm Lester Phi Beta Kappa Lectures on the Liberal Arts and Public Life at Mercer University. I was grateful for the invitation, as the Lester Lectures—devoted to the advancement of the liberal arts and sciences—seemed like a good way to bring together work I’d been doing at Mellon and, previously, as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The lectures were originally scheduled for the fall of 2020, but that schedule, like so much else in American higher education, was upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, the pandemic also altered my thinking about the future of the liberal arts and sciences. The three lectures that resulted from this rethinking, delivered virtually at Mercer on March 25 and 26, 2021, and recast and modestly revised as essays for this publication, represent my best effort to understand the prospects for the liberal arts and sciences in the post-pandemic world.

Our lives since the onset of the pandemic have not been entirely about COVID-19. One of the notable aspects of our recent experience has been the strange and powerful confluence of biological, political, and cultural forces and events. As the country struggled with the health crisis, it also wrestled with the unnerving political turmoil of the Trump presidency, with a crisis in race relations, and with closely related cultural schisms that seem to be deepening with each passing month. Economic dislocations brought on by the pandemic and by the relentless progress of technology made all these developments more difficult. The resulting turbulence was unlike anything we’ve known in the United States since the 1960s and early 1970s.

As we are learning every day, “post-pandemic” is a misnomer, if we understand by that term a return to the way things were before COVID-19 entered our species and our daily lives. Like the virus itself, history moves only forward, changing with time but never completely effacing what went before. The world we live in now and that our students will inherit has been permanently and powerfully reshaped by the pandemic and the fully intertwined events—political, economic, social, and cultural—of the past several years. What we owe our students is not the illusion of a return to a pre-pandemic state of things but a renewed commitment to educational practices that are thoughtfully aligned with the lives they will live.

I am grateful to Professor David Davis at Mercer University for the initial invitation to deliver the Lester Lectures; to Sally Baker for her excellent editing during their preparation; to Lynn Pasquerella, president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), for inviting publication of the lectures; and to Ben Dedman, writer and staff editor at AAC&U, for his editorial assistance in updating and revising the lectures for digital publication. I also want to thank Earl Lewis and Mariët Westermann, formerly of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, for the opportunity to serve as a senior fellow there, and my colleagues at Mellon—Gene Tobin, Dianne Harris, James Shulman, and Armando Bengochea—for their comments on earlier drafts of the lectures and for their steady friendship and inspiration during (and since) the time of my fellowship.