

Basic Research in the Humanities

The following preliminary definition was developed during 2010 in consultation with UCSB faculty across departments by Alan Liu, who as part of work for the Research Mission & Principles working group of the UC Commission on the Future sent out a call to colleagues (appended below). The call was for suggestions for a definition of basic research in the humanities that would be equivalent to definitions of basic research offered by scientists, whose representatives on the same working group of the UCOF were struggling to advocate basic research in their field. (See for example how the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory's ELSI [Ethical, Legal, and Social Issues] project discusses "basic" vs. "applied" science for the benefit of the public: <http://www.lbl.gov/Education/ELSI/Frames/research-main-f.html>).

Basic Research in the Humanities (Definition):

1. The discovery, preservation, and communication of the historical and present record of human society;
2. The invention of methods for studying and interpreting that record;
3. The investigation and preservation of the languages and linguistic skills increasingly needed in a global age;
4. Experimentation in the creative arts with a wide range of social and cultural experience;
5. The new exploration of combined scientific-humanistic/artistic approaches (e.g., neuro-cognitive approaches to literature).
6. The investigation of all the above within a serious and expansive horizon of ethical reflection.

[Original call:]

I am seeking for the Gould Commission's Research Strategies Working Group (RSW) a way to articulate a Humanities & Arts equivalent for the concept of "basic research." It is likely that the RSW will recommend that support for basic research be one of the mainstays underlying any vision of future collaborative, topically-oriented, or other new configurations and practices of research at UC. But all the examples are scientific or medical or agricultural; and the "value added" argument is all along those lines--pointing to concrete examples of the value of scientific research. While much of what humanists and artists do is surely analogous to basic research, there is to my knowledge no exact equivalent to the general idea of scientific "basic research." Indeed, we hardly, if ever, use the phrase as a justification of our work. (We speak of such component activities as "archival research," "site visits," "interviews," "textual study," etc., all the way up to "theory." But we don't have an operative genus-level concept for basic research, possibly because society doesn't think of us as doing "applied research" either, which would motivate us by contrast to defend basic research.)

How would we define "basic research" in the humanities, in the arts, and (I think this is the right way to ask the question) the more "cultural" sides of social science? And how would we do so in order to communicate the value such research adds? (For example, could the humanities, fine arts, and social sciences produce their version of the following effective poster from Berkeley Lab itemizing "breakthroughs that improved the world - and our lives"?:

<http://www.lbl.gov/Publications/breakthroughs/index.html>