



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
**Humanities**

THE CHAIRMAN

April 7, 2015

Vaishnavi Rao  
Founder and President, MIT INSPIRE  
77 Massachusetts Avenue  
Cambridge, MA 02139

Greetings,

Congratulations to all of you who have participated in the first MIT INSPIRE competition. Whether you are the students who did the projects, the parents and teachers who encouraged their efforts, or the judges who evaluated the work, know that, however challenging the endeavor has been, you have participated in one of life's great pleasures—learning what you did not know before.

This new venture—a national contest where high school students ask and answer big questions in the arts, humanities, and social sciences—would not have been possible without the MIT students who organized it and the MIT School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS).

It is no surprise to me that MIT would support a program such as INSPIRE. Long before C. P. Snow talked about what he saw as a growing rift between the sciences and humanities, MIT made sure there were no such intellectual silos in the minds of its students. Since the 1940s, MIT has required its engineers and scientists to study the humanities. Today, all MIT undergraduates take at least eight classes in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, which represent nearly a quarter of their course loads.

Why does a school famous for its scientists and engineers require its students to study across disciplines? Deborah Fitzgerald, the dean of HASS, says it is because “the world’s problems are never tidily confined to the laboratory or spreadsheet.” In a piece she wrote for the *Boston Globe* last year, she explained that when students study literature, language, music, and history, their perspectives broaden. “They learn that most human situations defy a single correct answer, that life itself is rarely, if ever, as precise as a math problem, as clear as an elegant equation.”

This is a perspective I share. I have found many of my answers—and questions—in philosophy, which I studied in college and graduate school, after serving in the U.S. Army in Vietnam. The study of human history, human nature, and how we interact has been important to me. My path of study helped me become a professor,

university administrator, college president, and now head of a government agency that gives funding to scholars and institutions dedicated to advancing the humanities.

Many of you participating in INSPIRE will soon finish high school and enter college. You may be tempted to think “I am a humanities person. I am only interested in majoring in history or anthropology.” or “I only want to do biology.”

Being passionately interested in a topic has great merit, but I invite you, as you continue your education and eventually enter the workforce, to always be open to fields that you do not claim as your own. Instead of saying, I am an *X*, a *Y*, or a *Z*, ask yourself this: What question do I want to answer? What problem do I want to solve? Pick a problem worthy of your time and energy and your brain and heart. Choose a challenge whose solution will contribute to the common good—and then draw on the humanities, sciences, music, art, economics, business, or whatever other field you need to get your answers.

Congratulations again on the first-ever MIT INSPIRE competition, and I wish you many successful competitions in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William D. Adams', written in a cursive style.

William D. Adams