

By Neil Offen

DURHAM — "The humanities aren't a luxury," to be enjoyed only by the wealthy, Duke University President Richard Brodhead asserted.

They are, he pointed out, "essential to our humanity. They enrich us as persons."

Brodhead, the co-chairman of the recently formed national Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, gave a stirring defense of the humanities and their importance Friday night at the Nasher Museum of Art.

The Duke president, who also is a professor of English and a longtime scholar of American literature, presented the annual Caldwell Lecture in the Humanities. The N.C. Humanities Council sponsored the lecture and also presented the John Taylor Caldwell Award — its highest honor — to Rep. David Price.

Brodhead argued that the humanities — the broad academic disciplines that study the human condition — "are not a specialized taste" but "are the way we come to understand" other peoples and other societies.

"We annex understanding through our abilities to enter into other worlds," which is what the humanities let us do, he said.

Because of the importance of the humanities, Brodhead added, "we need to think about the health of those agencies" — such as the humanities council — that focus on supporting the study and dissemination of the disciplines.

Keeping the humanities strong, Brodhead said, "is essential to our well-being. ... Only the

humanities raise the issue of life's meaning."

Tom Ross, the president of the UNC system, who presented the Caldwell Award to Price, reiterated the point.

"That," Ross said after Brodhead's remarks, "was something we all needed to hear."

In accepting the award, which in the past has gone to Bill Friday, Reynolds Price and Mary Duke Biddle Trent Semans, among others, Price described the importance of the humanities in his life.

The former Duke political science professor and one-time divinity student, noted that only the humanities "can illumine our personal lives and shared histories."