



National Humanities Alliance

# Humanities Policy in the Biden Administration

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“...the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.”

—*James Baldwin*

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# Overview

As President-Elect Biden considers his policy priorities, we urge him to recognize the importance of the humanities in meeting the challenges of our moment. The humanities have the power to:

1. Renew our civic and democratic culture;
2. Help Americans understand systemic racism and take steps to address it;
3. Enable productive global engagement;
4. Rebuild the economy and revitalize communities

This memorandum recommends policy initiatives, along with targeted investment in government agencies, to strengthen humanities infrastructure and support humanities educators, researchers, and community-based organizations in carrying out this crucial work. We urge increased investment in humanities education in under-resourced K-12 schools, two- and four-year colleges, as well as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). We also point to the dire needs of museums, libraries, and archives in rural and otherwise under-served regions. These institutions play an essential role in bringing communities together yet face existential financial threats due to the COVID-19 crisis.

The National Humanities Alliance recommends the following policies:

1. Movement towards an investment of \$1 per capita each to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in yearly appropriations (Page 7)
2. Additional funding for the NEH and NEA in subsequent Covid-19 relief bills, including at least the \$135 million in the current HEROES bill (Page 8)
3. Increased investment in the Department of Education's international education programs (Title VI and Fulbright-Hays), with greater focus on supporting these programs at minority-serving institutions (MSIs) (Page 9)
4. Increased investment in the Department of Education's history and civics programs at the authorized level (Page 9)
5. The reinstatement of programs at the Department of Education and the development of new ones to support K-16 education across humanities fields (Page 9)
6. Rebuild the capacity of the National Archives and Records Administration, which has been significantly diminished in recent years, to ensure the transparency and integrity of record-keeping by government agencies (Page 10)

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7. A large-scale employment program that would place humanities professionals in healthcare settings, nonprofit associations, and municipal, state, and federal offices to help document, analyze, and shape the nation's pandemic response (Page 11)
  8. A coordinated arts, humanities, and STEM policy, recognizing the role each field has to play in addressing our most complex challenges (Page 11)

The National Humanities Alliance (NHA), a nationwide coalition of organizations advocating for the humanities on campuses, in communities, and on Capitol Hill, can support the Biden Administration in pursuing these policies in the following ways:

1. Providing research on the impact of federal funding for the humanities, the benefits of studying the humanities, and the value of the humanities in community life;
2. Providing incoming leadership with a detailed picture of the field and its demographic and institutional diversity;
3. Connecting representatives from colleges, universities, museums, academic associations, libraries, and archives with policymakers to deepen their understanding of the needs of the field; and
4. Building support on Capitol Hill for increased investment in the humanities sector by facilitating direct engagement with constituents.

NHA is supported by over 200 member organizations, including colleges, universities, libraries, museums, cultural organizations, state humanities councils, and scholarly, professional, and higher education associations. It is the only organization that brings together the U.S. humanities community as a whole.

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# Meeting the Challenges of the Moment

## Renewing our Civic and Democratic Culture

The humanities nourish democracy by fostering civic engagement, understanding across difference, and analytical skills. Whether in K-12 or higher education, it is in humanities classrooms that students learn about civic and political institutions, citizen participation, and the founding ideals of the nation. It is also where they learn where we have fallen short of our ideals and about how those ideals have motivated citizens to mobilize for their rights and the rights of others. Community-based humanities programs at museums, libraries, and other civic spaces offer communities opportunities to come together, explore each other's histories and cultures, and begin to bridge divisions.

A robust corpus of humanities research that challenges previous generations' assumptions about our past and incorporates the cultures, literatures, and voices of all Americans into our national story underpins teaching at all levels and community-based humanities work. This research is crucial in helping citizens understand our deep cultural and political divides, which must be understood before they can be bridged. Essential to all of these endeavors are libraries, museums, and archives, from the National Archives to small historical societies preserving local cultural heritage in every corner of the country. Adequate investments in these institutions will enable us to deepen understanding of our past and imagine a better future.

## Helping Americans Understand Systemic Racism and Take Steps to Address it

Perspectives from the humanities are essential as we work to address systemic racism. We need to learn and talk about each other's cultures and values; how we got to this place in history; how we remember the past; how we reason; how emotion influences judgment; the impact of public action on representative government. Bold investigation and evidence-based analysis of all these issues and more allow us to better understand ourselves and one another. Humanities-based understanding is essential to the work necessary to create a more just and equitable future. Key to this understanding is humanities' cultivation of skills in critical analysis—evaluating what we read, hear, and view and assessing the truth and falsity of the information and arguments we encounter.

For examples of NEH programs that have broadened understandings of diverse histories, supported communities in grappling with racial injustice, and built connections across communities, see page 8.

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## Enabling Productive Global Engagement

Cultivating broader understanding of other cultures and expertise in languages other than English is an essential step to ensure that the U.S. can again become a productive partner in addressing global (as well as domestic) challenges. Education and research in the humanities cultivate deep knowledge of the languages, cultures, and histories of rapidly changing areas of the world—knowledge that national security, diplomatic, and business communities need in order to understand the contexts in which they work. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, refugee crises, and threats to food security require a workforce with international language and cultural expertise. So too do effective military forces and diplomatic services. The Department of Defense reports that only 28 percent of military positions with language requirements were filled with personnel at the required proficiency level.<sup>1</sup> Advanced education in language and culture provides insight into the complexities of global and regional issues, including differences in values, perspectives, and priorities. A study by the U.S. Committee on Economic Development found that American businesses lose almost \$2 billion each year due to language or cultural misunderstandings.<sup>2</sup>

## Rebuilding the Economy and Revitalizing Communities

Museums, historic sites, cultural centers, and historical societies are facing major economic challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to significant job losses and threatening the collapse of many organizations. The American Alliance of Museums [estimated](#), for example, that 30% of museums would fail as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. If a large number of cultural organizations fail, the repercussions will extend far beyond the individual employees to the broader communities. They provide jobs, boost tourism, and offer educational opportunities for all age groups. They offer school tours and host summer camps for children and lectures and discussion programs for adults. Without staff and institutions to protect historical collections, our cultural heritage will be at significant risk of irreparable deterioration. The vast majority of collections are not digitized in any way—especially those held by small institutions, which predominantly collect and represent the histories of rural and minority communities—so they remain inaccessible to teachers and students. Only with federal support can these organizations continue to play their robust role in our economic, civic, and educational lives.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Senate, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities in the Federal Government, 112th Congress, 2nd Sess., May 21, 2012, S. Hrg. 112-663,9, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112shrg75214/pdf/CHRG-112shrg75214.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Committee on Economic Development, ED, 2006. "Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security,." 2016. <https://www.ced.org/pdf/Education-for-Global-Leadership.pdf>

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Investing in humanities research and education is just as crucial to our ability to understand the COVID-19 crisis and envision how to rebuild community life in its aftermath. Humanities expertise has been essential throughout the pandemic: historical research on the 1918 flu pandemic serves as an indispensable reference point for policymakers contemplating choices to shut down schools and businesses. Online theater and reading groups have sustained communities and individuals in this time of severe isolation, and lectures, webinars, and other cultural events have proved vital to the hundreds of thousands of Americans who participate. As we consider how to move forward, humanities-based knowledge will be essential to addressing the cultural differences and structural inequalities that have exacerbated the impact of the pandemic. In the past decade, faculty in our nation's colleges and universities have turned with increasing energy beyond their campuses—teaching incarcerated people in prisons, working with communities suffering from opioid abuse, making their scholarship on history, culture, languages, and the arts accessible in public libraries and community centers. Now is the moment to support and enhance these efforts, to combat the skepticism about the value of higher education revealed by polls, particularly in rural America.

As we face the ethical imperatives of the pandemic and ask what we, as a society, owe the pandemic's essential workers, from doctors and nurses to grocery workers, we need to draw on examples from our past, [like the GI Bill](#).

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# Policy Recommendations

To ensure that educational and cultural institutions are best able to serve their students, communities, and policymakers, robust investment is needed across a range of agencies, each of which supports humanities education, research, and community-based programs in distinct ways.

## Invest in the National Endowment for the Humanities

### **Regular Appropriations**

Despite the Trump Administration's repeated efforts to defund the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), Congress has passed increases for the NEH in each of the past six years. This is thanks to robust bipartisan support for the agency. The NEH was funded at \$162.5 million in F.Y. 2020 and continues to be funded at that level under the current continuing resolution. Despite this incremental growth, however, when adjusted for inflation, the NEH's funding has decreased by more than 15 percent since 2010.

For F.Y. 2022, we urge the Biden Administration to request at least \$175 million for the NEH to begin rebuilding this capacity while working towards a yearly investment of \$1 per citizen.

NEH funding reaches every congressional district, supporting:

- Innovative humanities teaching in higher ed, including programs for community colleges, HBCUs, HSIs, and TCUs;
- The preservation of cultural heritage at risk of deterioration;
- Cutting-edge research;
- Professional development for K-12 teachers;
- Veterans' reintegration into civilian life;
- Public programs such as museum exhibitions and community conversations.

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In recent years, NEH grants have played an essential role in deepening our collective understanding of under-represented histories and fostering deeper understanding across differences:

- With a grant from the NEH, faculty at Tuskegee University introduced students and the surrounding community to the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray and explored their often-overlooked relationship to the university.
- NEH funding to Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, Andrew Jackson’s Hermitage, and Historic Hudson Valley has enabled these organizations to highlight the history of enslavement, paving the way for more organizations to follow in their footsteps.
- By supporting professional development programs for K-12 teachers, the NEH ensures that the U.S.’s diverse history is taught in primary and secondary classrooms. Programs like “The Most Southern Place on Earth” and “Stony the Road We Trod” take deep dives into civil rights history, literature, and music while programs like “Muslim American History and Life” and “Religious Worlds of New York” help teachers understand our nation’s religious diversity and support teachers in incorporating that diversity into their curricula.
- Funding for community archiving projects has helped incorporate the histories of a diverse array of Americans into library, museum, and historical society collections, ensuring that their perspectives are part of the historical record. One hundred percent of survey respondents from a community-based effort to document African American experiences in Milledgeville, Georgia, felt an “enhanced sense of connection to their community,” and some commented that the workshop “[showed their community that they] have more in common.”

A greater investment in the NEH will ensure that programs like these have a broader reach to heal community divisions, build civic infrastructure, and provide needed education on our country’s enduring values.

## **Relief Funding**

The NEH received \$75 million in relief funding through the CARES Act, 60 percent administered by the NEH and 40 percent by state humanities councils. The museums, libraries, archives, associations, and small colleges that received these funds were able to avoid layoffs, create jobs, safeguard cultural heritage, host virtual programs, provide resources to teachers faced with a rapid transition to remote instruction, and safely reopen. Nonetheless, the need among educational and cultural institutions far exceeded the amount appropriated: The NEH was able to fund only 14 percent of applications received, while on average the state councils have been able to fund only 38 percent.

To better support the sector, the House has proposed an additional \$135 million for the agency in the latest version of the HEROES Act. We urge the Biden Administration to support the House’s proposal given the ongoing needs of educational and cultural institutions. While yearly appropriations fund essential programming, research, and education, relief funding is needed to cover operational expenses and ensure that a wide range of institutions, especially those in low-income areas, can survive to serve the American public once the crisis has passed.

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## Support Humanities Education at the K-12 and Higher Education Levels Through the Department of Education

### Support Title VI and Fulbright-Hays

At the height of the Cold War, Congress established the Title VI and Fulbright-Hays programs—both administered through the Department of Education—to deepen students’ and scholars’ understanding of foreign cultures and foreign languages. This expertise is no less needed in today’s globalized world. These programs remain the core way the federal government ensures that the U.S. higher education system is prepared to teach about all world regions and over 160 world languages, ensuring that students are well-equipped to pursue the many careers that require this expertise.

The Trump Administration proposed the elimination of these essential programs. Congress continued to fund the programs. Nonetheless, due to years of level funding, the programs have not recovered from deep cuts in F.Y. 2011, which severely eroded our international education and foreign language infrastructure. As the Biden Administration rebuilds relationships around the world, increased investment in these programs sends a clear signal to the higher education community and the world that the U.S. is committed to cultivating citizens equipped for productive global engagement in the awareness that our greatest challenges must be addressed from a global perspective.

In administering Title VI funds, we urge the Biden Administration to give priority to minority-serving institutions and other higher education institutions that propose significant collaboration with minority-serving institutions, as proposed in [H.R. 2562](#), introduced in the 116th Congress by Reps. David Price (NC-04), Susan Davis (CA-53), and Andy Levin (MI-09).

### Support History and Education Programs

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, signed into law in December 2015, authorized two programs designed to support K–12 history and civics education. These are the only Department of Education funding lines for these crucial subjects. American History and Civics Education Grants are designed to support evidence-based strategies to encourage innovative American history, geography, and civics instruction. These grants emphasize programs that benefit low-income students and other underserved populations. The American History and Civics Academies program, meanwhile, offers intensive academies for teachers and students to learn more about civics.

To date, Congress has not yet funded these programs at the authorized amount of \$6.848 million—a small amount to support subjects that we have so recently learned are imperative to a flourishing democracy.

### Reinstate Programs and Implement New Ones to Support K-16 Education in the Humanities

The Department of Education is also well positioned to launch programs that support humanities learning in K-12 education. While the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) affirms that a

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well-rounded education is essential, it offers little support for teachers in humanities fields. We urge continued funding of the History and Civics program along with the development of new programs to support K-12 learning in areas such as literature, religion, and philosophy—including ethics. We also urge the reinstatement of the Department of Education Language Enrollment Census, which monitors the health of language education in the U.S.

The upcoming re-authorization of the Higher Education Act also provides an opportunity to re-affirm the value of a well-rounded education and provide support for students and educators in the humanities.

## Invest in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

NARA is an indispensable protector of our civic culture and the integrity of the public record. This chronically underfunded agency encompasses over 40 facilities nationwide, including 14 presidential libraries. Although perhaps best known for displaying the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution, NARA is especially important right now as the guardian and organizer of the records produced by government agencies—including the White House. This essential work has been not only underfunded in recent years, but in some cases obstructed. The integrity of these records is essential to restoring the integrity of federal agencies themselves.

NARA also plays an essential role in more routine government transparency, coordinating the declassification of federal records and ensuring compliance with the Freedom of Information Act. Its facilities provide access to immigration, naturalization, and census records, often essential to provide proof of citizenship. Veterans and their families rely on military records at NARA to gain access to benefits.

NARA requires an infusion of funding to serve these crucial roles. Its budget has decreased the last two years even as its responsibilities have grown along with its backlog. The federal government's transition to electronic records, including email, has dramatically increased the number of records NARA must process and catalog. Forced to do more with less funding, NARA has had to reduce hours at its research rooms and limit the number of materials individuals can access at one time, expanding the time required to conduct research.

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## Invest in Job Creation Programs That Rebuild the Capacity of the Humanities Workforce to Serve Communities Across the Country

Thousands of recent PhDs in the humanities and their colleagues across a wide variety of institutions are facing unemployment as a result of the pandemic, just when the expertise of humanists is most needed in government, in health care, in civic organizations, and in industry. Congressman Ted Lieu is proposing a New Federal Writers Project—a \$55.5 million jobs program, to be administered by the Department of Labor, that would put cultural workers back to work across the country. The program would employ 300 recent PhDs and 600 recent bachelor’s degree graduates in the humanities. A large-scale employment program for humanists, such as historians, ethnographers, and scholars of literature and the arts, especially focused on the analysis and documentation of cultural responses to COVID-19, would place humanists in healthcare settings, nonprofit associations, and municipal, state, and federal offices to help document, analyze, and shape the nation’s pandemic response. Such a program would alleviate unemployment and embed humanists in various sectors of the economy where their expertise in social and cultural analysis would facilitate better responses to health disparities by race and class and provide frameworks for addressing systemic racism in education, healthcare, housing, and beyond.

## A Coordinated Approach to Arts, Humanities, and STEM Policy

We hope to see a comparable investment in the arts and STEM fields, cognizant of the ways that integrating perspectives across these fields is essential for solving society’s most vexing challenges.<sup>3</sup> Investing in the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, alongside the National Endowment for the Humanities, is essential to ensuring the vitality of our cultural and educational institutions. In addition to this investment, we urge the incoming Administration to call upon the expertise of the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services in identifying and developing new federal policies for the arts and cultural sectors that will support our nation’s broader economic, domestic, and diplomatic strategies. In particular, we urge support for collaborative programs between arts, humanities, and science agencies such as those between the NEH, NEA, and the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health.

A hallmark of these agencies has been to pioneer relationships with other federal agencies that recognize the role of the arts and culture to impact U.S. policy goals in the areas of science, health, defense, education, and community development.

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<sup>3</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, “The Integration of the Humanities and Arts with Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in Higher Education: Branches from the Same Tree.” Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2018.

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“The dedication of a library is in itself an act of faith. To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future.”

— *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*

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