

Public Witness Testimony
Submitted to the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate
Submitted by the National Humanities Alliance, Regarding FY 2016 Funding for the
National Endowment for the Humanities
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(April 30, 2015)

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Tamara Mann and I am the John Strassburger Fellow at Columbia University. I am writing to testify on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance in support of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

My first class as a college professor started at 9am. It was only 7:30 and I was pacing the small seminar room, fretting about a course I had long admired but never imagined I would actually teach. Every summer for the past six years, 30, low-income, minority public high school students, arrive on Columbia University's campus to take an intensive Great Books course as part of the Freedom and Citizenship Program. For a veteran teacher, the syllabus is challenging: one day Plato, the next Aristotle, and then on to Locke, Jefferson, Lincoln, and King. For a novice, it is completely terrifying.

My students arrived on time. They ambled into the seminar room, some laughing, others stoic, all clutching their copies of *The Trial and Death of Socrates*. As they sat down, I knew that they desperately, aching, wanted to be in this room. Their parents hadn't gone to College and there they were, in high school, sitting around a Columbia University seminar table. I recalled what Professor Roosevelt Montás said to me when I agreed to take on the course, "be quiet and be curious."

That first day of class I sat quietly for a minute or two and then opened our time together with a question: what fills you with a sense of wonder? Their answers were tender and earnest; they ranged from observations about primary colors to the miracle of small acts of kindness. And then came Quanisha. "I'll tell you," she offered, "but don't laugh. I *wonder* what this guy Socrates is saying. I just don't understand him. I have been up all night. I read this three times and I don't know what he is saying and I wonder about it." So our class really began.

It was Socrates' description of wisdom that caused the most confusion. "I don't get it," Lanique piped, "he is wise and not wise, but wiser than other people and still ignorant. That doesn't seem very wise to me." "Look closely at the passage in front of you," I said, "what do you think Socrates is trying to say?"

Gabriel spoke up, "I think he is saying that you're not wise if you think you know something that you don't know. It's like a person who knows a lot about one subject and just because of that he thinks he knows about everything." "So, how would you describe this definition of wisdom?" I followed. "Maybe wisdom is just knowing what you don't know," he replied. Laura and Genesys smiled. Now we could all remain in the classroom and claim to be wise, just by admitting what we did not know. Fabulous!

"But wait," questioned a soft voice to my left. "Is that enough?" Fatoumata leaned into our seminar table. "How can it be enough to just say you don't know? Don't we have to do more? Don't we have to figure out how we could learn about a subject?" The class found its rhythm and my students, drawing deeply from their reading of Socrates, debated the contours of

wisdom, knowledge, and learning for the greater part of an hour. The morning ended with our own working definition of wisdom that we would try to apply to our future classes, “Wisdom is being upfront about what you don’t know and then carefully, ploddingly, figuring out how you would learn more about it.”

As the summer progressed, the questions and the wonder continued. “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains,” read Mystery but “Why does Rousseau think we are born free? Is anyone really born free?” My students pounced; everyone had a contribution. That day their comments didn’t just come from the text, they came from them. They talked about the challenges of living with a parent suffering from drug addiction, the insecurity they felt in foster care, and the daily hardships of poverty.

That summer we didn’t just discuss freedom as an abstract concept; we discussed what that word meant to us as individuals, as members of families, and as citizens of our shared country.

At the end of class, after a particularly harrowing conversation about all of the challenges my students faced, Heebong sighed and voiced our collective sense of defeat, “but what can we do about these issues. They are so...big.”

We could have ended there. If I were alone, I probably would have. But we were in a classroom and we had started with Socrates. “We need to get wise,” said Fatoumata, at first quietly and then emboldened by a chorus of her peers, “We need to get wise.” These extraordinary students then started designing a plan of study, a course of intellectual action to learn how to tackle the problems they had faced. Their plan of action required knowledge produced by biologists, physicians, psychologists, philosophers, politicians, and sociologists, to name only a few. These students understood that the great human problems of their generation were at once structural and personal. To solve them, they needed an education in the sciences and the humanities.

When Professor Montàs reflects on the purpose of a humanities education he explains, “In most disciplines, the subject to be learned is at the center.... In this field of study, the student, the individual as a living growing entity, is at the center.” Today, I ask you to support programs like this one. Programs that don’t only give students content but actually help them understand the purpose and meaning of that content.

My students came to this course because it was a means to an end – college. They left the course almost embarrassed by the shortsightedness of that goal. As one student put it “Now I want to go to college not just to get there but to really learn something, so that I can give back; it’s not just about me and my success but about what I can do with it.” This is exactly why we have to support the humanities. It is courses like these that turn us from students of a topic into citizens of our great country.

This is just one of the many programs that provide rich humanities content to underserved populations across the country, paving the way for personal achievement and civic engagement. The National Endowment for the Humanities has been a leader in supporting many of these programs. By way of the state humanities councils, the Endowment has long supported *Clemente Courses in the Humanities*, which provides a rigorous education in literature, philosophy, American history, art history, and critical thinking and writing for adults facing economic hardship. Students receive credit from Bard College, and the course strives to create a bridge to higher education by developing the skills, confidence, and motivation necessary to succeed in that context. Other programs include literacy initiatives for low-income families; research and

teaching grants to community colleges, tribal colleges, historically black colleges and universities, and Hispanic serving institutions; and with FY 2016 funding, grants to museums, libraries and cultural organizations that reach at-risk audiences.

In the past few years, the Endowment has focused particularly on supporting veterans in their transition to civilian life. Since 2013, NEH has awarded grants to the *Warrior-Scholar Project*, which offers a two-week “humanities boot camp” to aid in veterans transition from the military to college. Currently hosted at three universities and—thanks to support from NEH—will be offered to an additional eight campuses in the summer of 2015. Through small grants to all of the state councils, the Endowment has also enabled reading and discussion programs for veterans in VA hospitals, community centers, and public libraries using great works of literature and public performances for and involving veterans that draw on timeless themes from classical Greek dramas of soldiers returning home from war. As noted in the agency’s appropriation’s request, expanding these programs is one of the Endowment’s key goals for FY 2016.

To ensure that programs such as these continue to reach underserved communities—and that the humanities research, K-16 teaching, and historical preservation that underpins them continues as well—I ask you to support full funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Thank you very much for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

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Founded in 1981, the National Humanities Alliance advances national humanities policy in the areas of research, preservation, public programming, and teaching. More than one hundred organizations are members of NHA, including scholarly associations, humanities research centers, colleges, universities, and organizations of museums, libraries, historical societies, humanities councils, and higher education institutions.

The Freedom and Citizenship Program at Columbia University enrolls low-income rising high school seniors from New York City schools in a rigorous college-level summer seminar. They read major works of political and moral philosophy from the ancient world to the present and explore the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. In the ensuing academic year, the students collaborate on a project that allows them to apply themes and ideas they explored in the summer to an issue in contemporary public life. Since it was founding in 2009, 100 percent of its participants have attended college.