

Public Witness Testimony

**Submitted to the Interior, Environment & Related Agencies Subcommittee,
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives**

Regarding FY 2012 Funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities

Michael Brintnall—President, National Humanities Alliance (April 1, 2011)

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the National Humanities Alliance (NHA) and its 104 member organizations and institutions, we write to express strong support for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Our members, and the thousands of teachers, scholars, humanities organizations and institutions they represent, use NEH grants to maintain a strong system of academic research, education and public programs in the humanities. ***For FY 2012, we respectfully urge the Subcommittee to continue funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) at the FY 2010 enacted level of \$167.5 million.***

Overview

As you know, the President's FY 2012 Budget proposes \$146.3 million in funding for NEH, including \$118.2 million for program funds and \$28.0 million for administration. This represents an overall cut of \$21.2 million (about 13%) from the NEH's FY 2010 budget level. For NEH program funds (which support grants at the national and state levels), the President's budget represents an even deeper decrease of \$21.8 million (about 16%) from the FY 2010 level of \$140 million. *We do not support the cuts proposed by the Administration*, and are especially concerned about the deep erosion of funds that the President's Budget represents for NEH competitive grants nationwide.

In recent years, the National Humanities Alliance has proposed significant new funding to help rebuild and expand NEH programs, that were cut dramatically in the mid-1990s. We recognize the seriousness of the fiscal situation faced by Congress and the Administration, and understand that now is not the time to request an increase for this agency. However, we do not believe that cutting a relatively small discretionary program like NEH—which represents a tiny fraction of the federal budget and plays such an important role—is the solution to the current crisis.

- While much smaller than many of its counterparts in the federal government, such as the National Science Foundation, NEH is the lead federal agency tasked with advancing and preserving knowledge in a broad range of academic fields, and it plays a central role in supporting the nation's education and research infrastructure.
- NEH grants support high-quality resources, materials, and programs that reach individuals and communities in every state and district in this country.
- NEH funding is an extremely efficient investment of taxpayer funds, with most NEH grants leveraging significant direct or indirect non-federal support.

A \$22 million cut to NEH will have a significant and detrimental impact on the ability of this agency to fulfill its mission to the American people, without resolving the deficit in any meaningful way. Moreover, these cuts will deprive the American people of critical resources at a time when they are needed more than ever.

Importance of the Humanities

The public value of the humanities is unquestioned. They enrich individual lives, they bring communities together, they underpin our civic institutions, they bring forth our history and our shared values, they make possible how our heritage is understood and preserved, and they support a broadly educated and competitive workforce.

The humanities encompass a broad range of fields—including the study of languages, linguistics, literature, history, law, government, philosophy, archaeology, comparative religion, ethics, and more. From the basic building blocks of early education, to the highest levels of academic attainment, humanities fields provide essential skills and competencies, and support critical modes of thought. Students who get a sound humanities education, focused on careful reading and disciplined writing, do better in all fields of study, and are sought after by employers. Study and knowledge of the humanities prepare us to become active and informed citizens, as well as to succeed in the increasingly competitive, and global workforce.

Almost all sectors and trades depend on a U.S. workforce with access to high-quality education in humanities fields across the educational continuum. But the humanities workforce itself is significant, with more than 2.5 million Americans directly engaged in a broad range of humanities professions—K-12 teachers, college/university faculty, museum curators, librarians, translators, news analysts, and others. This figure does not include the many trades that require professionals with advanced aptitude or training in the humanities, such as: advertising, marketing, public administration, law, national security, intelligence, international trade, arts, entertainment, science, engineering, health, and more.

Finally, the humanities represent areas of expertise vital to addressing complex policy challenges—from informing medical ethics, to understanding the root causes of world hunger, to fighting illiteracy. And they support capacities especially relevant to the 21st century: knowledge of world cultures, religions, and languages; understanding of U.S. history and democratic traditions; and humanistic perspectives to evaluate the implications of scientific and technological advances.

National Needs

As the NEH founding legislation recognizes, there is a clear federal role in supporting the humanities, just as there is for the sciences and other fields: “An advanced civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone, but must give full value and support to the other great branches of scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.” At a time of rapid globalization, technological development, and severe economic challenges, the wisdom of this statement is *as evident today – if not more so* – than it was almost fifty years ago.

According to many corporate executives, higher education leaders, and other experts, the U.S. liberal arts curriculum in our nation’s schools, colleges, and universities is at risk. The U.S. has a long tradition of fostering broad access to education that integrates learning across the sciences, mathematics, and the humanities. Even as we move away from this approach, it is aggressively being emulated by China and other nations around the world who have identified this aspect of our educational system as a unique driver of U.S. economic leadership and innovation in the last century.

In recent studies, employers rank reading and writing as top deficiencies in new hires, with more than a third of employers finding high school graduates “deficient” in reading comprehension, and “written communications” topping the list of applied skills found lacking in high school and college graduates. This comes at a real cost—with annual spending on remedial writing courses estimated at more than \$3.1 billion for large corporations and \$221 million for state employers.

As the impact of the recession continues to be felt around the country, many Americans are turning to further education, and local resources like libraries, museums, and state humanities councils as a means of finding jobs, and connecting with their communities at a time of crisis. While demand for their services increases, many non-profit humanities institutions and organizations are struggling to maintain access to programs, due to continued constriction of traditional revenue sources (e.g., endowments, private giving, state and local funding). School districts are cutting back on teachers and course offerings, and many colleges and universities—especially public institutions—have closed humanities departments or cut back on full-time instructors, despite growing wait-lists for basic courses like writing and history.

The NEH Role

The NEH is the lead federal agency with the mission to create, preserve, and disseminate knowledge in the humanities that is essential for the achievements described above. Each year, NEH awards hundreds of competitive, peer-reviewed grants to a broad range of nonprofit educational organizations and institutions, and to individual scholars, throughout the country. Grantees include: universities, four- and two-year colleges, humanities centers, research institutes, museums, historical societies, libraries, archives, scholarly associations, K-12 schools, local education agencies, public television/film/radio producers, and more. These grants help support educational advancement, professional development, jobs and institutional activities for thousands of students, teachers, faculty, and others engaged in the humanities in communities across the U.S. every year.

As noted above, we are especially concerned about the decline in funding for NEH competitive grants. From the community’s perspective, NEH competitive grants fall into two categories:

- ‘Core Programs’ (*Research, Education, Preservation, Digital Humanities, Challenge Grants, and Public Programs*)
- ‘Special Initiatives’ (*Bridging Cultures, We the People*)

NEH grants are known for their quality, and their ability to leverage significant non-federal funding for humanities projects nationwide. They are also extremely competitive. Annually, demand for humanities project support through NEH *far exceeds funding available*. In FY 2010, NEH received 5,205 competitive grant applications representing more than \$515 million in requested funds (a 20% increase in the number of applications submitted for the previous year). Of these, NEH was able to fund only 16.6% of the proposals submitted. This is too low, when compared to recent rates as high as 32% reported by grant-making agencies like the National Science Foundation (NSF), and means that excellent work vital to the humanities is unable to go forward.

Examples of underfunded NEH grant programs include: *fellowships and collaborative research; digital humanities projects; professional development for teachers and faculty; preservation of historically-significant collections; public film, radio, television, and digital media projects; and challenge grants* to build institutional capacity and leverage non-federal support.

Impact of the President's Budget Request

Competitive Programs—Unfortunately, the President's Budget for FY 2012 would deeply and disproportionately cut NEH competitive grants. Collectively, total funding provided for competitive grants through the NEH Core Programs (listed above) would decrease from \$79.6 million in FY 2010 to \$70.8 million in FY 2012—an \$8.7 million (or 11%) cut. In addition, the President's Budget terminates *We the People*, an initiative launched in 2004 to advance understanding of U.S. history and culture (funded at \$14.5 million in FY 2010). Since its inception, *We the People* has been structured to redirect funds across NEH programs and divisions. But by cutting *We the People*, rather than allocating its resources to the NEH programs that underpin it, the budget proposal further weakens NEH core programs. While amounts have varied annually, in recent years, NEH core programs have received, on average, roughly half of *We the People* funds (\$7.4 million in FY 2010). ***Factoring in termination of We the People, we estimate the total impact of the President's Budget on NEH competitive grants would be a reduction of at least \$16 million (or 18%).***

Looked at over a longer time frame, the situation is even more difficult. Funding for NEH competitive grants through the national core programs is very low compared to past years, and we cannot let it fall further behind. In FY 1994 (the nominal funding peak for the NEH), collectively, funding for these programs was provided at \$116.4 million. Adjusted for inflation, this would be equivalent to \$173.7 million in today's dollars—more than double the current level.

Special Initiatives—The President's Budget would provide modest, new funding of \$4 million for the agency's *Bridging Cultures* initiative, a program developed by NEH Chairman Jim Leach to enhance Americans' understanding of the nation's rich cultural heritage, as well as the cultural complexity of the world in which we live. The National Humanities Alliance has advocated for many years for expansion of the agency's programmatic coverage in areas of international education, global competency, and cultural understanding, and we welcome this effort.

NEH Federal/State Partnership—NEH extends its reach through annual operating grants to state humanities councils located in every state and U.S. territory. For FY 2012, the Administration has requested \$40.1 million, a nominal decrease of \$270,000 from the FY 2010 enacted level. There is a significant decrease, however, when also factoring in the termination of *We the People*, of a total of roughly \$7 million (or 15%).

Conclusion

This Subcommittee stands as steward to many of our nation's greatest shared natural and cultural resources. We recognize that Congress faces unprecedented and difficult choices in this and coming years. Nevertheless, we ask the Subcommittee to consider the demonstrated contributions of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the importance of continued funding for the humanities through NEH as an investment in the nation's long-term economic recovery and competitiveness, the strength and vitality of our civic institutions, the preservation and understanding of our diverse cultural heritage, and the lives of our citizens. Thank you for consideration of our request, and for your past and continued support for the humanities.

Founded in 1981, the National Humanities Alliance is a coalition of nonprofit organizations and institutions dedicated to the advancement of education, research, preservation and public programs (www.nhalliance.org).