

Testimony on the FY-2000 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities

Presented to the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies (Committee on Appropriations), by John H. D'Arms, President, American Council Of Learned Societies, on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance

April 14, 1999

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am John H. D'Arms, a classicist whose work focuses on the history of ancient Roman cities, culture and society. I am President of the American Council of Learned Societies, the pre-eminent private humanities organization in the United States, which was established in 1919 and now includes 64 member societies and associations. The purpose of the council is to advance humanistic studies in all fields of learning in the humanities and related social sciences and to maintain and strengthen relations among national societies devoted to such studies. In 1994, the U.S. Senate approved my appointment to the National Council on the Humanities, on which I served until 1997. I also serve on the Board of the National Humanities Alliance.

It is a pleasure to testify before you today. I am here to represent the National Humanities Alliance and its membership of eighty-five scholarly and professional associations; organizations of museums, libraries, historical societies, higher education, and state humanities councils; university-based and independent humanities research centers and others concerned with national cultural policies. A list of NHA member organizations is attached.

First, a word about the humanities and how we think about them. Congress enacted the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965 in order "to promote progress and scholarship in the humanities and the arts in the United States". This act established the National Endowment for the Humanities as an independent grant-making agency of the federal government to support research, education, and public programs in the humanities.

In the founding legislation, Congress defines the term humanities as "the study of the following: languages, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism, and theory of the arts; and those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods".

I'd like to take a moment to expand on this definition by sharing a quote from Merrill Peterson, a professor at the University of Virginia, who authored a 1987 report entitled "The Humanities and the American Promise". In this report, which was the result of a colloquium funded, in part, by NEH, Professor Peterson provides what I think is a clear definition of the humanities in terms of its practical importance to democracy, as well as to the intellectual life of each citizen:

...we think it is misleading to regard the humanities basically as a set of academic disciplines or, even more restricting, as a set of "great books". We identify them, rather, with certain ways of thinking--of inquiring, evaluating, judging, finding, and articulating meaning. They include the developed human talents from which texts and disciplines spring. They are, taken together, the necessary resources of a reflective approach to life. The value of a reflective approach can be best appreciated by considering the alternative: a life unilluminated by reasoning -- in short, the "unexamined life" that Socrates described as not worth living. Where the humanities are vigorous, action follows from and is guided by reflection. It is their capacity to change, elevate, and improve

both the common civic life and individual lives that make the cultivation of the humanities important to the American people.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to express support for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the President's request for \$150 million in Fiscal Year 2000. My colleagues in the NHA and I urge the committee to accept and recommend to the House of Representatives \$150 million for the coming federal budget year. At the same time, we also wish to go on record as supporting the recommendation of \$150 million for the National Endowment for the Arts and of \$34 million for the museum portion of the budget for the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Mr. Chairman, we recognize the enormous pressure that you and your colleagues are enduring in the appropriations process. Nonetheless, we urge you to do the very best that you can to fund the critically needed increases for these agencies.

My colleagues and I are pleased with the program for NEH in the next fiscal year that has been proposed -- we are especially grateful that NEH has assigned the highest priority to rebuilding and reinvigorating the core programs at NEH which are so important to the humanities enterprise and to the millions of Americans who benefit from those activities.

While NEH continues to be a critical base of support for humanities activities in this country, the disproportionate reduction in FY-1996 appropriation to a level nearly 40% below FY-1995 has continued into the present fiscal year, at considerable long-term disadvantage to Americans everywhere. The increase requested by the President -- \$110.7M for FY-1999 to \$150M for FY-2000 -- still leaves appropriations for NEH well below the mark of \$177M appropriated for FY-1995. I want to emphasize that in looking at the cost of continued level funding for NEH we are talking about costs to Americans in terms of quality of teaching in schools, in terms of preservation of our cultural heritage, and in terms of educational films, museum exhibitions, library programs, and other programs aimed at making the humanities accessible to all.

NEH and Education - Although education in the United States is primarily a state and local matter, the Federal Government plays a variety of important roles in education through the US Department of Education, and key agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities -- NEH has supported a wide variety of projects in virtually all of its grant-making programs, geared toward strengthening teaching and learning in schools and colleges, making technology more accessible and effective as a tool for better education, and providing adults with continuing education such as augmenting formal school education with informal learning in museums, libraries, state humanities council programs, and other settings. The core of NEH is preserving the nation's cultural heritage and advancing scholarship and education. The organizational scheme of NEH lends itself to supporting a wide range of educational projects and initiatives, with support drawn from every division. Although the Department of Education has vastly more funding for education, NEH through its meticulous peer review process is able to bring a focus and continuity to special education projects which is only rarely possible in programs of the federal education department.

Another strength of the NEH in responding to educational challenges stems from an early decision in the development of the endowment to organize the agency's programs by function rather than by academic discipline. We think the NEH is much the stronger for selecting among proposals on the basis of quality rather than by parsing out percentages of funds by particular fields.

Summer Institutes and Seminars are a low cost but highly effective way for NEH to address the critical need for better teaching in US schools and colleges. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future released a report in 1996 called "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future" with this fundamental finding: "What teachers know is the most important influence on what students learn."

In the summer of 1998, NEH sponsored a total of 52 seminars and institutes, benefiting a total of 1,017 school and college teachers. By June of the next year those teachers will have reached an estimated 150,000 students; by June of 2000 they will have reached a total of more than over 1.3 million students.

At the requested funding level for FY-2000, the Endowment would be able to increase the number of projects supported by about 50 percent and to fund 77 seminars and institutes. These funds would go to over 1,475 teachers who would teach more than 222,000 students -- an additional 445 teachers and 70,000 students beyond the present fiscal year level. The FY-2000 program would also allow NEH to extend the reach of the seminars and institute by creating a special fund called Seminar and Institute Dissemination grants to support seminar and institute participants who wish to share the benefits of their work with other teachers and schools.

The transforming impact that NEH seminars and institutes have on teachers provides benefits to students for many years thereafter. In NEH seminars and institutes, teachers and administrators experience the thrill of intellectual discovery in the company of colleagues drawn from institutions from across the entire nation. Teachers who are excited about the subject they teach communicate their passion and excitement to students, making the classroom a vibrant place and fostering understanding and retention of the material that is taught. Let me illustrate this by reporting two of the hundreds of the comments received by NEH from school teacher participants in last year's Summer Seminars and Institutes.

The experience not only surpasses all of my expectations, it was life changing. I've never returned to school so recharged. The directors, contributing faculty, visiting scholars, discussions, projects-- all were outstanding. I spent over a week in August incorporating over fifty, yes fifty, no exaggeration, new units, Internet sites and programs, and teaching techniques into my own classroom -- a teacher from Minnesota, institute on Manuscript Culture

The sense of excitement about learning that I felt during the month of classes is what I would most like to bring to my own classroom. Teenagers in high school, except for those in the AP classes, are often bored with school and uninterested in being there. Having had my own sense of excitement rekindled, I'm hoping to bring it to my classes. The Institute reminded me of how much fun it is to learn and how much more alive learning can make one feel. -- a teacher from Maryland, institute on the Renaissance

Support for scholarly research has been at the center of NEH activities since the beginning. The fruits of scholarship function in a process somewhat like the uses of individual discovery in science. But, today I draw your attention to the many uses made of such scholarship in education. For example:

Scholarly Resources - Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867 is an NEH-supported project that uncovered, transcribed, and interpreted letters, affidavits, and other kinds of direct testimony made by slaves and ex-slaves during and after the Civil War. This five-volume resource has transformed our understanding of emancipation and freedom. Documents from the project are being used in college and secondary school classrooms as background for books on topics such as the Civil War, African-American history aimed at young readers, and to script

dramatic readings of slave testimonies for radio broadcast. In addition, these materials have been used in museum and library exhibits. Historian Eric Foner drew upon the materials in preparing his widely acclaimed new book *The Story of American Freedom*.

Technology for Education - NEH has played a leading role in helping school teachers, as well as scholars, make more effective use of technologies. As computers, Internet connections and the like spread through American schools, the endowment staff realized that the lack of significant content threatened to discredit the superb access such innovations provide. One example of an NEH initiative that is really helping teachers to make technology work for them is EDSITEment, a resource developed to provide teachers, educational administrators, and lifelong learners with access to the highest quality humanities web-sites and, importantly, tools to make effective use of the digital information in the classroom. The EDSITEment program, which is a collaboration among NEH, MCI WorldCom, and the National Trust for the Humanities, was developed using NEH's highly regarded peer review process along with advice from scholars, teachers, superintendents, parent-teacher associations, and others. NEH has culled 49 sites from among the 66,000 sites identified as educational on the Web -- and has plans to identify an additional 100 sites this year. The selected sites are excellent in content, design and usefulness in the classroom. In addition, the site includes learning guides (e.g., how to use a search engine), and step-by-step lesson plans keyed to subject areas.

EDSITEment has been an exceptional success by many measures. Research by WorldCom showed 277,414 hits in September, 1998 with 29,339 user sessions. Over five months, these figures have continued to rise, with 40,931 users session reported in the month of March, 1999 (the average length of a user session in March was 15 minutes), and 743 links to EDSITEment from other sites on the web. There have been highly favorable reactions to EDSITEment. For example, a high school teacher from Marietta, Georgia wrote:

...I have struck a gold mine of great information. Thank you tremendously for the splendid work you are doing. I really appreciate you, and will definitely commend you to my colleagues.

Mr. Chairman, in my testimony I have stressed the commitments, and the accomplishments, of the NEH in improving the quality of teachers and teaching in the Humanities. As a teacher at the University of Michigan for more than thirty years, I have participated myself in many NEH-sponsored programs in schools, both in Michigan and in other states. These occasions always remind me that education in the Humanities is a continuum: students prize the dedicated and charismatic teachers who opened the worlds of literature and history to them; but those teachers themselves became great through their own immersion in the learning of those who came before them -- their own university professors, but also the works produced by scholars of earlier generations. Humane learning extends across the generations, as the NEH recognizes, by supporting both excellent teaching, and the scholarship upon which it is based -- and by bringing the results of both to the wider American public.