

Testimony on the FY-1993 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), Presented by Professor Heidi Byrnes, Chair, Department of German, Georgetown University, on behalf of the Joint National Committee for Languages, the Modern Language Association, and the National Humanities Alliance

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I am Heidi Byrnes, Professor and Chair of the Department of German at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. I am also the current chair of the Advisory Committee on Foreign Languages and Literatures of the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), an organization of teachers and scholars in the modern languages and literatures. In 1990 I was chair of the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. I am speaking today on behalf of the Modern Language Association; the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL), a coalition of forty-five organizations with a constituency of more than 350,000 teachers and scholars; and the National Humanities Alliance (NHA), which represents seventy scholarly and professional associations and organizations.

I wish to call your attention to the significant growth that the language field has experienced in recent years and the major role that federal funding has played in fostering that growth. Recent years have witnessed important changes in language teaching in the United States. New developments in language acquisition theory and in methodology, technology, assessment, and professional education have given teachers the means to strengthen and refine their instructional programs. The last twenty years have also seen growing national recognition of the need to expand foreign language study. Business and industry have increased their investment in language instruction, colleges and universities have strengthened their requirements for language study, and funding of state and federal programs has expanded. The federal government has intervened both by providing funds for a number of support programs and by identifying certain specific languages as critical to the national interest.

I am happy to report that the results of this interest and intervention can be seen in a dramatic increase in enrollments in foreign language study in higher education. The MLA recently completed work on a national survey of language enrollments in higher education. The survey shows that after a ten-year period of decline, language registrations grew 30% between 1980 and 1990, compared to 15% growth for college and university enrollments generally. As of 1990 language registrations in higher education had reached an all-time high. Further, registrations in three of the languages designated by the government as critical grew dramatically during the 1980s: Chinese by 71%, Russian by 86%, and Japanese by 297%.

I believe federal funding and the responsiveness of the Congress have had major impact on foreign language education in the United States. Congressional intervention has been timely and effective, and we believe it should be maintained to provide continued momentum for growth and continued encouragement for the field. Of particular importance at this time is the Special Opportunity in Foreign Language Education administered by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Over more than two decades, the education programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities have responded to initiatives from the foreign language field and have provided significant support for a number of innovative and creative projects, including institutes and

seminars for teachers, curricular projects, materials development, and projects that have strengthened the connections between language study and other humanities fields.

Responding to widespread national recognition of the need for more U.S. citizens to learn foreign languages, the Congress two years ago approved funding for a Special Opportunity in Foreign Language Education to be administered by the Endowment's Education Programs Division. The creation of this initiative has greatly encouraged the field to improve language instruction and expand language programs. Moreover, the Special Opportunity program has been carefully constructed. We believe the extensive consultation with the field carried out by the chair of the Endowment, Mrs. Cheney, and others was decisive at arriving at such a responsive program.

The first application deadline in the Special Opportunity program occurred on 15 September 1990, the second on 15 March, 1991, the third just a few weeks ago on 15 March 1992. Under the elementary and secondary education program in the division, proposals have been encouraged primarily for summer institutes for school teachers; for the higher education program, the main emphasis is on strengthening undergraduate teaching through projects that incorporate texts and other cultural materials into language courses, extend language teaching into courses in other disciplines, and assist in the preparation of future teachers. Guidelines are flexible, and, for example, projects that improve connections across levels of study have also been encouraged.

In two years, the Special Opportunity in Foreign Language Education has stimulated significant new activity in the language field. Among the interesting projects that have been funded under the Special Opportunity are summer institutes for teachers of Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian; institutes exclusively for elementary school teachers; programs to integrate language study into the wider undergraduate curriculum at liberal arts institutions; projects to develop an achievement test in Japanese, materials for teaching Arabic, and materials and curriculum for teaching Francophone West African literature. These and other projects funded by the Endowment are becoming well known in professional circles and are likely to provide useful models for colleagues in schools, colleges, and universities beyond their home institutions.

I can speak from personal experience about the value of a project I have been involved in that has been funded under the Special Opportunity in Foreign Language Education. Guided by members of its advisory committee, the Modern Language Association organized a series of summer institutes specifically for supervisors of foreign language instruction in elementary and secondary schools and coordinators of language instruction programs in colleges and universities. Foreign language supervisors in school districts and coordinators in university language departments have major responsibility for program effectiveness: both groups are concerned with curricular development and planning, selection of materials, training newly appointed instructors, and assisting experienced instructors.

First piloted in 1988, the MLA institutes are designed to bring the latest information about the theory and practice of language teaching to these key professionals. I have been an instructor in the institutes from the beginning of the program. Since 1988 the institutes have served about 110 supervisors and coordinators of language programs across the country, representing school districts, colleges, and universities in twenty-seven states, including California, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Ohio.

The MLA received funding from the NEH in 1990 to hold an institute at Middlebury College in July 1991. A second institute funded by NEH will be held on the campus of the University of Georgia this coming summer. Support from the Endowment enables the MLA to cover instructional costs, travel expenses, and stipends for the participating supervisors and coordinators, many of whom also have

major institutional responsibilities during the summer, when other teachers are usually on vacation. Response to the institutes has been overwhelmingly positive, and participants have particularly cited the benefits of making contact with colleagues at all levels of instruction who share their perspectives on language teaching and on supervision.

A major requirement of the institutes is that each participant must submit a project proposal and must develop, with guidance from the institute faculty, a curricular project that will benefit the program and faculty in their school system or home institution. The projects have helped significantly to extend the benefits of participation in the institutes to other teachers and to students. Here are the titles of some projects that institute participants have developed: "Integration of Video Materials into First-year French Courses"; "From Second-Year Spanish to Julio Cortazar: The Articulation of a Reading Skills Sequence"; "Selection and Sequencing of Reading Materials in a Three Semester Russian Language Program"; "Elementary Language Course Content and Methodology"; and "Reading to Write and Writing to Read: Strengthening the Curriculum with Proficiency-Based Activities in Written Expression."

Speaking as an instructor in a program funded by the NEH's Special Opportunity, and aware of many other fine projects that colleagues around the country have been able to develop, I can attest to the major role that federal funding has played in maintaining the momentum of strong public interest in studying foreign languages and in helping the teaching profession improve the effectiveness and availability of instruction at this time of great interest and growing demand for foreign language instruction on the part of students across the country. Continued support for this federal program will, I believe, continue to yield results beneficial to individual students and to the nation.