

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

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TO : Ronald S. Berman

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FROM : John H. Barcroft

SUBJECT: Program Definition and Problems, State-Based  
Program and Special Projects Program

This memo concentrates heavily on the state-based program, rather than the special projects program; this is not because the latter is less important, but because explaining the former partly explains the latter. Let me precede this discussion by some general comments, which may or may not be comprehensive and accurate, but which at least define a problem as we perceive it in this division.

The whole area of public activity in the humanities is uncharted. Since the Chautauqua movement, there has not been a consistent effort to reach large numbers of adults with programs in the humanities. The Great Books program, the activities of university extension, and the various completely commercial endeavors, have been like the blind men feeling the elephant. Historical societies, museums, and public libraries have operated partially as sources for programs in the humanities aimed at adults, but they too have done this sporadically and without much noticeable impact. The media have played with the humanities in fits and starts, but not with much quality or depth. Public programs in the humanities have been fragmented, discontinuous, and contradictory. They have been operated primarily by institutions which are underfunded and understaffed, and which have no broad spectrum of competence across the humanities. A striking aspect has been the absence of the academic humanist from such activity. The Great Books program has involved well-educated housewives, or lawyers, or whatever, as discussion leaders; and the substance they have been discussing has been largely the humanities; but the humanist has been absent. The media have paid some bright Bryn Mawr graduate \$1000 to research an historical documentary by reading some historical works and "calling up a few professors," but fundamental contact with knowledgeable humanists in developing such programs has been the exception, rather than the rule.



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The result is that no one in the country quite knows what a public program in the humanities is, nor do they know what kinds of resources they need to draw upon in order to mount one. All the institutions which function in this area have other, more general responsibilities to which they give higher priorities. (A public library staff would not often ask its Board to define its primary mission as "the mounting of effective public programs in the humanities," though both they and their Board might accept "the provision of knowledge for the community in an educational context." The latter would permit the ignoring of the former.)

A fundamental problem of NEH in all public program areas is therefore a) to involve academic humanists in a thoughtful consideration of how they can be effective in the public program area, b) to find ways to raise the priority which institutions accord to public programs in the humanities, c) to mount programs which are continuous rather than one-shot, and which have cumulative impact rather than simply passing across the scene and fading into the sunset, and d) to create structures which can serve as the focus for discussion, analysis, and implementation of strong, continuing public humanities programs.

To begin to approach these objectives, NEH will have, for better or worse, to make a very clear definition of what it intends to mean by "the humanities;" otherwise, we will be trying to create new levels of effectiveness on quicksand. We will either have to accept rather literally the Congressional definition, and finesse philosophical disputation; or else we will have to reenter the philosophical arena and try to provide a generally acceptable consensual definition in an area which is at present quite dissensual.

## I. Background of the state-based program

The preceding section of this memo attempted to describe the general context in which the state-based program operates. In this section, it seems useful to describe the political context which served as a catalyst for the state-based program.

In the summer of 1970, NEH was considering starting its state-based program through the state arts councils, by making planning grants to each of the 50 state councils, to be followed by funding to make grants within the states. At about this time (but quite independently), the Associated Councils of the Arts, the national lobby for arts councils, was urging its members to turn themselves into state arts and humanities councils in order to seek NEH funding.

There was a clear understanding in the NEH staff that the proposed program would be oriented toward the arts, and that it would be unlikely that the arts councils could serve as a focus for humanities activities or give effective visibility to such activities. (As the director of the Michigan Arts Council put it subsequently, "you must know that when you deal with arts councils you're going to get our second best effort.") It was further recognized at NEH that the arts councils did not understand higher education intimately, and would therefore not be our best access to the humanistic resources essential in a program in the humanities aimed at adults. Nevertheless, there was a general feeling that the Congress and our own Council expected some fairly rapid action in this area. (This was the first of two straight years in which the House appropriations committee cut NEH funds \$2 million and stated in their report that the absence of an NEH state program similar to that of our sister agency made such reductions reasonable.) Hence, a quick way out would be to make planning grants to the arts councils, and we would be in business.

It was decided that the disadvantages of such a procedure were so substantial as to make it probably disastrous, both in terms of program quality and in terms of long-term political efficacy. The agency instead committed itself to the slower, more laborious process of establishing informal groups in a handful of states, hoping that such groups would be acceptable within the state (e.g., able to counter the movement of state arts councils to acquire NEH funds), that they would have access to and understanding of the nature of higher education in their state, that they would be able to involve academic humanists effectively in their planning, and that they would believe that mounting a successful program in the humanities deserved their best effort.

When the experiment began in the fall of 1970, no one at the agency had a firm conviction as to how fast the program should move, nor was it clear that the procedure we were experimenting with would work---work, in the elementary sense of creating an effective group of people who could in fact get on with their business. It very quickly became apparent that the procedure would work, that good people could be involved in such informal groups, and that we could create a group which at least understood what NEH was all about, even though they (as we) often had trouble knowing how to implement their understanding concretely.

It also began to seem that we had stumbled onto a procedure that had even more efficacy than we had initially realized. For not only were these groups capable of serving as procedurally acceptable agents for NEH funds; they were actually raising with the academic communities in their states the whole question of what responsibility the academic humanist had to the adult public in their community, and they were of necessity raising it in a very concrete way that did not permit the question to be ignored or finessed. So they were serving to generate real thought in the academic community about public programs in the humanities in a way that the NEH had not been able successfully to do over the previous four years. Their proximity to a specific group of academic humanists, and their relationship to their own and other institutions, allowed them to raise this question in a much more serious way than three hundred "fliers" or brochures from NEH ever could. We were creating structures that could make real headway on the objectives of involving academic humanists, having impact on institutional priorities, and providing continuity and focus not only for the projects they began to initiate, but also for NEH projects (down the road, these groups can serve to create programs which follow up on our national programs---so that when we support a good film for national distribution, the state-based groups could sponsor local programs around the film).

Meanwhile, it was also becoming clear that some state arts councils were interested in a pre-emptive move that would bind NEH to them whether the agency liked it or not. They got Governors to change their names to arts and humanities councils, and/or to designate them as the official state agency to receive NEH funds. (Texas succeeded, Florida almost succeeded, Montana tried, South Carolina would like to try.)

The rationale, then, for deciding to press the NEH program at full speed was a) the procedure worked both as a procedure and as a promising foundation for many NEH public program activities, and b) it would usually be impossible, purely on state political grounds, to work outside an established state agency in a situation where the Governor of the state had specifically designated them as the chosen agent for NEH purposes; by contrast, if NEH had established an informal group before the arts council moved pre-emptively, then the arts council was unlikely to make strenuous objections either publicly or privately. (This has been true in Kansas, Louisiana, Wyoming, Missouri, Florida, and Minnesota). Thus, the more quickly we could move to establish such groups, the less likely we were to lose our right to choose an appropriate group to work with. We were---and are---in a sort of low-key race against disaster.

Disaster is a strong word. Let me explain it by drawing a comparison. Suppose we have a state-based group, and the adult educators on it aren't very imaginative, and are scared of the humanities, the academic humanists on it are beaten down and don't really believe they have much to say to the public, the museum and historical society people on it don't really have a clear grasp of how they can reach the community with humanities content, and the "public" people on it are pretty dubious about whether academic humanists have anything sensible to say about anything. This is the worst misfortune that could happen to us in our existing program. But through staff-work by NEH staff, through helping in every way over a period of time, through assimilating that group to a full

understanding of NEH, and in the last resort through the withholding of funding (the equivalent of nuclear war, in this case), we could reasonably hope that over time such a group would begin to function effectively and with good quality programs.

Then, imagine a state arts council which has our money, and from which we can't get it away without a major political flap, and which doesn't even include academic humanists, adult educators, and others with some understanding of the university and college community and what it can and cannot do. Add to this a situation in which no one on the Council or its staff is really putting as its first priority the development of a good humanities program, and in addition doesn't really care whether the adult public has any clear understanding of the difference between ghetto arts projects, and humanities projects. All of this would create a situation in which no amount of NEH staff effort could make headway for the humanities, and in which there would be no reasonable hope that over time effectiveness and quality would characterize their humanities program. That is disaster.

A good bit of this background section has dealt with certain realities of the program vis-a-vis state arts agencies. I have mentioned it to explain why we hope that we can have strong support from the Chairman to press this program just as fast as we can without getting thoughtless or careless. But obviously, this is not just a section on how we began an "us and them" operation. To summarize:

- 1) we are creating structures which provide continuity and focus for local adult programs in the humanities, and which can serve as a programmatically important way of increasing the commitment to adult programs in the humanities nationally;

- 2) we are creating groups who understand the humanities; who have access to higher education and the community, and who have as their primary point of reference this agency; not our sister operation, and not established state bureaucracies;

3) this procedure seems to be both politically acceptable in the short run, and receptive to long-term increases in the quality and effect of the programs our money supports;

4) we are trying to establish these groups rather quickly;

5) these groups meet specific NEH needs of a quasi-political sort, related to broadening the constituency for the agency, and being responsive to the Congress.

## II. Through the Looking Glass (More Background)

In the state-based program, everything works backwards (except the staff). Some assumptions which are general to other NEH programs are simply inaccurate here. For example:

1) Many good applications are received in education, research and fellowships for projects the applicant very much wants to complete; not all can be funded; therefore a tacit assumption in both the staff and the Council is that those who receive funding are fortunate; we are helping them. In the state-based program, our grantees are helping us by accepting our grant. There's no money in it for them or for their institutions (because they must regrant within the state to other institutions, and only a minimal amount of money can stick to their institutional fingers). In fact, since they must raise an equal amount of money to match our program grant, they not only don't get money, they must find money. We ask them to bear part of the administrative cost of the program as well. Beyond that, this is not a task which will get them status within their institutions (except in special instances), because it is not an activity which most faculties see as central to their professional or institutional purposes. So if we want chancellors, really good academic humanists, and people who are important in the public life of their state to help us in this enterprise, we must be credible on two matters: a) first, they must believe that we are serious in the program, that the agency has made a fundamental commitment to it, and that we are not going to pull the rug out from under them in a year or two,

and blandly say "thank you very much, sucker;" b) second, they must believe that the program will be of genuine importance to their state, and that it offers real avenues for discussing serious business of real concern to citizens of the state. If they believe those two things, we can ask---and usually get--- the real involvement of people who otherwise would simply say they were too busy for this kind of chore. .

2) In general, NEH has avoided, as have most other Federal agencies, long-term commitments in their grant activity. I believe our longest-running grant at present is the MLA editions of American authors, and even that is planned to have a conclusion. Ordinarily, the most serious practical objection which can be raised to a possible grant is that if you get into it, you'll never be able to get out of it. Although the state-based grants are made on a year-by-year basis, and thus have the capacity to terminate, we have made it exceedingly clear to state-based groups that we are not in this for the short run, and that we are in it for the long haul. Thus, though we fund them through the grant mechanism on an annual basis, we relate to them as permanent associates of the agency.

3) In most NEH programs, the fundamental source of the decision to fund or not to fund is the proposal document. What the grantee has not said in his own behalf in that document cannot weigh in the decision. In the state-based program, we also place prime emphasis upon the proposal document. But the staff works with the state-based group in the development of such a document, and therefore the document in a sense does not invite a flat up or down decision. Rather, it represents a point on a spectrum---as far as we and a particular state-based group have been able to progress in implementing the program at a particular point in time.



In a few instances, we have felt that the group was simply not yet ready to go operational, and we have encouraged them to spend an extra three to six months working to further develop both their program and the document describing it, in order to be able to bring it to the National Council on the Humanities with a recommendation in favor of funding. We have avoided bringing state-based proposals to the Council if we would have to bring them with a negative recommendation. In short, the document upon which a grant is based is not, in itself, comprehensive of our and their intent, and has to be complemented by staff and Council judgment about the probabilities of long-term success by the state-based group as distinct from the document of the state-based group.

We believe that these procedures are effective in a program of this sort, and that they have gone a long way to make the agency's seriousness about the program convincing to the kind of people we would like to involve in state-based activity.

### III. Program definitions

We have funding in fiscal 1972 which will permit the award of operational funds to 16 state-based groups, and the award of planning funds to 20 more. The hope is that by the end of fiscal 1972 sixteen states will be operational, and 20 well along in planning. We hope to complete the planning part of this program in fiscal 1973, and to have all states operationally funded in fiscal 1974. A planning grant is made for \$15,000 or under, and runs for approximately six months; an operational grant is made for between \$100,000-\$150,000, and runs for approximately a year; of this amount, up to \$25,000 is for administration of the program, and need not be matched; the remainder is for program (re-granting), and must be matched by private and local funds on a one-to-one basis, in hard dollars and in-kind contributions. The level of funding is therefore not one which permits very broad grant support for wide-ranging activity, and since NEH encourages reaching broadly through as many institutions within the state as possible with NEH funds, the average grant made by a state-based group to a particular institution for a particular program is not large.

NEH asks six things of all state-based groups:

- 1) that they serve as a re-grant agency within the state, making funds available to institutions and organizations;
- 2) that they define their program as aimed at the adult, non-school population of the state;
- 3) that they concentrate the program on the humanities as distinct from other areas of knowledge;
- 4) that they involve academic humanists centrally in the planning and implementation of their program;
- 5) that they center the program on problems of real importance to the public in the state; and
- 6) that they concentrate their program around a theme which is clear both to humanists and to the public.

It is clear, then, that this is not a general support program for the humanities at the state level. State-based groups do not give fellowships, support research, or make grants to educational institutions for internal purposes. Beyond this, it is not a general support program for public activity in the humanities; on the contrary, it is highly focused around a theme (and the better the theme is, the less generalized the state-based group's support is), it concentrates on public problems, and it takes a rather hard-nosed view that the humanities, essentially as Congress has defined them, should be the focus of support.

Focusing the program on fairly concrete objectives has had several advantages. It has kept the state-based groups from diffusing their energies on a large number of activities unrelated to one another. It has made the identification of the initial membership of such groups somewhat easier for NEH. It has enabled

NEH to explain with reasonable clarity what our measures of quality and effectiveness are in the program. It has permitted at least some points of common activity and definition among all state-based groups, so the program doesn't become a state-by-state patchwork. Most of all, it has permitted both the staff and our state-based group to concentrate on a definable (and we hope achievable) task within the large, vague, and undefined area that comprises "doing something in the humanities for adults."

It may be useful here to make brief comments about each of the six main points mentioned above as basic in all state-based programs.

1) They re-grant within the state. This insures that from the beginning they will think about the nature of the resources in the humanities in their state, and that they will not simply define a program which their particular institutions can monopolize. It means that they have to accept a real responsibility for being in lively contact with all the humanists in their state, no matter which particular institution the humanists are at. It also insures that NEH funds will reach across a state broadly.

2) They aim at adults. Such a stipulation may be obvious; but it is surprising how many programs which this Endowment has funded to reach adults have in fact reached captive school populations---whether high school or college. Pragmatically, we point out to our state-based groups that NEH has funds (through our education division) to provide access to the humanities for all school populations---from elementary and secondary to graduate schools. This money is to reach adults. It is particularly important to stress this given the current youth adoration syndrome in the media and elsewhere.

3) They concentrate on the humanities. People tend to reason from what they understand. In the public program area, a definition of what constitutes a humanities program is not clear, and people tend to reason by analogy. Two such analogies

are available, widely understood, and fundamentally misleading. One is the analogy to existing programs in the arts. (An arts program is the Boston Symphony, Waiting for Godot, and an art exhibit; therefore a humanities program must be someone celebrating Beethoven, Becket, and Braque). Another analogy is to community action or "helping" programs. (The Office of Education mounts programs which bring university resources to bear on practical community problems; the humanities means humane and humanitarian; therefore a humanities program aimed at the public must mean getting humanists to plan public housing, or helping poor people.) Unless we can articulate effectively to our state-based groups that we mean something other than these things by both humanities and by public programs, we're in trouble. Hence, our emphasis on the humanities (and, included in that, a very realistic understanding of what the humanities can and cannot do.)

4) They involve academic humanists in a central role in planning and implementation. This provision aims at providing further guarantees that the dangers mentioned in point three do not come to pass. The best way to be sure that you're not defining the humanities unrealistically, or asking the humanist to do unrealistic and inappropriate things, is to have some academic humanists sitting with you as full participants as you plan and implement your program. There is another reason. It is possible to mount a public program in the humanities which causes the public to know that Aristotle and Locke existed and were both useful and thoughtful, and not to know that there are living people in the United States who spend their lives trying to deal with the same kinds of intellectual problems that Locke dealt with---and are also both useful and thoughtful. The object, then, is to be sure that the public comes to some better understanding and use of the 100,000 or so American academic humanists who are not dead, and who need the support, understanding, and attention of society.

5) They center the program on problems of real importance to the public in their state. Section 3(a) of our legislation instructs NEH to support the humanities with attention to how they can speak to "the current conditions of national life." In a program aimed at a broad adult public, whose only common denominator may well be that they are citizens of a state, this instruction seems to apply with special force. Beyond that, the more effectively the Endowment can find areas in which that

kind of Congressional language can be appropriately implemented, the less likely we shall be asked to implement it where it isn't. Pragmatically, this kind of focus on public problems can attract public participation in the program. It undercuts a common public (and Congressional) perception of the humanities as frivolous fields which only a leisured class can enjoy, and permits the state-based groups to attract the interest of new constituencies for the humanities. (E.g., labor---the chairman of the Alaska humanities group is Dwayne Carlson, president of the State AFL-CIO.) Philosophically, both the Congress and the Council on the Humanities have a sense that more and more public discussion in America is becoming strident and frustrating, and that more and more decisions are being made at all levels of the society on an essentially technical and anti-historical, anti-philosophical basis. With this, there is a feeling that the disciplines and practitioners of the humanities might be able to make some modest witness for reason, thoughtfulness, and perspective.

6) They concentrate on a theme. This is a purely pragmatic policy. Based on fairly careful analysis of Office of Education programs, and those of our sister agency in the state arts program, the staff and Council came to feel that unless state-based groups were asked to think through how any given program of theirs could have coherent meaning and impact across the state, they would almost inevitably fall into "projectitis," and make a series of widely disparate little grants all over the state, and that such grants would be so diffuse as to permit neither measurement of progress nor visibility within the state. Beyond that, insistence on a theme would permit state-based groups to establish priorities for re-grant funds, and to explain to institutions within the state what it was they hoped to get from them in the way of re-grant applications. So far, every single group has felt strongly that the idea of focusing on a theme has been (or will be) helpful.

#### IV. Major On-Going Problems

I hope it is not irreverent, presumptuous, or self-pitying to suggest that after the preceding lengthy description of what we are trying to achieve, our major on-going problems are pretty obvious. Implementing the program is our major on-going problem!

That problem does divide into sub-problems, however. I should mention four of them. They are: 1) persuading people to give their best effort to the program; 2) helping to articulate the program to people beyond the initial state-based group; 3) keeping in enough contact with state-based groups to keep their aspirations high; and 4) given the first three, a major problem is NEH staff recruitment.

1) I have become convinced that unless the state-based groups can "smell" the conviction on the part of NEH people that this program is urgent and serious, we can't get a program we can be proud of. With it, we can work with them; without it, they become dabblers, loath to let go but unwilling to really produce, and any effort of the NEH staff to help them will bring cries of officious Federal meddling. The conveying of urgency, then, is a never-ending challenge for every member of this staff.

2) The state-based groups are initially, when they meet in Washington, somewhere between four and eight people. They add others to their group when they return to their state. Naturally, the main burden of explaining what this program is all about falls on the four to eight people who were here. But NEH must help them in this process, or else we are simply asking more than we have a right to expect, and more than we can get. This means developing material they can use, and it means NEH staff travel to their enlarged meetings. It also means developing over time reinforcing devices to help restore a state-based group's flagging spirits. (I might add that the NEH staff also needs restoration of its occasionally flagging spirits!)

3) It is exceedingly important for the state-based groups to have a sense that they are "part" of NEH; otherwise, they may become moribund, or worse, misunderstand and undervalue our national programs of fellowships, research, and education, as well as our national public programs. Part of this problem is being met by a good bit of staff contact between these groups and the NEH state-based program staff. Down the road, we are going to have to find a way to keep them informed about and

sympathetic to all NEH activity (just as the Arts Endowment does with their state arts agencies.) This will make them more effective spokesmen for us within the states, and also can help to avoid a situation in which our interest and theirs are not mutually supportive.

4) Staffing, both in terms of numbers and in terms of quality is going to be a serious long-term problem. This is not a cheap program to run. If we are going to have these groups develop in a way that is compatible with the national objectives of the agency, and is of good quality in itself, we have to have enough staff in the program so that each state-based group really has good liaison with the agency. Our rough rule of thumb is that a staff person can handle ten states. So numbers of staff are really important. More important is kind of staff. I really do believe that unless the staff can convey conviction about this endeavor, we have to wrap it up. That means we are looking for the exceptional person who ideally meets the following criteria: 1) he or she believes in and understands the academic humanist; 2) he or she believes in programs aimed at the public (what some of my snottier friends in academia like to drily call "the folk;") 3) he or she believes the humanities have something to contribute to public understanding of real concerns of the society; 4) he or she believes that groups within the states can be at least as smart about figuring all this out as a NEH staff member or Council member can be. Beyond this, it would be nice if the person were articulate, personable, not particularly personally acquisitive, and absolutely hard-nosed and analytical about the substance and procedures in this program---so that he or she can't fall into the trap of thinking that intentions are results.

I believe the staff people who have joined this division so far come close to meeting this ideal. The question is can we keep finding that kind of person.

## V. Special Projects

The special projects program has three characteristics of particular importance. 1) It serves as our basic device for providing funds to applicants for public program grants at the local level in states without a state-based program; 2) it attempts to achieve the same goals as the state-based program, but at the local or regional (i.e., at all levels except the state or national level) level; and 3) it is the only money available within NEH for experimenting with new kinds of public program grants. The special projects program policy is to encourage applications which relate the humanities to public problems, but it also welcomes applications which have a more general focus.

### A. Background

Special projects as a program category has existed within NEH public programs for three years. Prior to October, 1971, the program had never had a staff person with full-time responsibility for running the program; staffing needs in other areas had precluded assigning a full-time staff member. The creation of the state-based program, and the linking of that program with special projects, encouraged a new level of seriousness about the special projects program. It became clear, for example, that carefully developed special project applications and grants could serve to create in a state a concrete example of what a subsequent state-based program might achieve. Also, the special projects program could serve as a "quality control" on the state-based program, by funding applications of exemplary quality even in situations where a state-based group was functioning. Additionally, it could serve to keep us from getting totally locked in at the state and local level to providing NEH funds through our state-based groups. Last, it could serve as a source of funding for the high-quality project within a state (or between several states) that would be too expensive for a state-based group to afford. (The average re-grant by a state-based group is under \$5,000 at present; even with increases in their funding, they are not going to have the capacity to make grants in the \$50-\$100,000 range for a long time, if ever.)

It is too early to tell how effective the special projects program can be. We have only been grappling with its capacities for about six months, and a very long lead time is going to be necessary before we can show some real results, for reasons which appear below.



## B. Major Problems

This program, as all public program activity of NEH, has suffered from the confusion in the public mind, and in the academic mind, about what constitutes a public program in the humanities. It has also suffered from the relative lack of attention which academic institutions have paid to this kind of problem, as distinct from research and internal teaching. As a result, the volume of application has been low, and generally of low quality. Many applications have simply been off the subject. Before we can make this program imaginative and exciting, we have to make it functional and visible. This means explaining the program to people, telling them that we want good applications, and in general increasing the volume of application to the point that real selectivity can occur.

There are four things that make us hopeful:

- 1) we have a good staff person to concentrate his energies solely on the program;
- 2) we plan to disseminate information about the program to a broad range of appropriate institutions, organizations and agencies; this has not been done in the past, and we believe that one of our problems is that the program is simply not known of broadly enough;
- 3) we are hoping to fund a conference keyed very specifically to the special projects program that will put us in touch with good people at 30 or 40 first-rate institutions who might wish to submit applications to the program;
- 4) over time, the state-based groups themselves can serve as stimulators of good quality applications to the program.

Beyond that, we hope that as NEH public program activity in general expands, the special projects program can serve as a salient for discovering new approaches to our grant-making, new areas where NEH could make headway in the public program area, and new kinds of resources in the country which can be applied to the public program area.