

Public Witness Testimony
Submitted to the Interior, Environment & Related Agencies Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives
Regarding FY 2014 Funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities
Michael Witmore—Director, Folger Shakespeare Library (April 10, 2014)

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the the National Humanities Alliance with its 104 member organizations and the Folger Shakespeare Library, I write to express strong support for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

Overview

For FY 2014, we respectfully urge the Subcommittee to fund the National Endowment for the Humanities at the administration’s requested level of \$154.3 million.

The National Endowment for the Humanities has endured significant cuts in recent years. From FY 2010 through FY 2013, NEH has been cut by more than 16 percent, from \$167.5 million to less than \$140 million. These decreases have come on top of a long history of cuts have eroded the agency’s capacity to meet the demand for its support. In constant dollars, NEH’s current funding stands at just 51 percent of its level of funding at the end of the Reagan administration. Modestly increasing NEH’s budget to \$154.3 million would allow the Endowment to build its capacity to support the humanities at a time when the humanities are increasingly called upon to meet national needs.

While we recognize the seriousness of the fiscal situation faced by Congress and the Administration, and we understand the difficult choices that are before this Subcommittee, we believe that the capacity of NEH must be expanded. In the remainder of this testimony I will articulate the reasons for this expansion by first describing the ways in which the humanities have been called upon to help accomplish four critical national goals **and then by describing the central role of the National Endowment for the Humanities in achieving these goals.**

Importance of the Humanities to National Needs

The humanities are increasingly called upon to play critical roles in our efforts to achieve four national goals: opportunity for all Americans, innovation and economic development, productive global engagement, and strong communities.

Opportunity for All Americans

Individual mobility is severely limited by deficiencies in a number of critical skills that are fostered by the humanities. In a series of recent studies conducted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, employers ranked reading and writing as top inadequacies in new hires. More than a third of employers found high school graduates “deficient” in reading comprehension, and “written communications” tops the list of applied skills found lacking in high school and college graduates. These deficiencies limit the economic mobility of individuals and also carry an economic burden for society as annual spending on remedial writing courses is estimated at more than \$3.1 billion for large corporations and \$221 million for state employers.

The Common Core standards that have been adopted in forty five states call for the humanities to play a central role in correcting these inadequacies by fostering essential skills and habits including reading, writing, critical thinking, and effective communication across primary and secondary school curricula.

Innovation and Economic Growth

At the same time, employers increasingly seek employees who can combine the cultural knowledge and analytical ability fostered by humanities programs with technical knowledge and scientific research fostered by STEM education to create innovation and economic growth. In an effort to serve this demand, a **commission** on the future of engineering education has recommended increased interdisciplinary education—including the humanities—in order to train engineers with the broad perspective necessary for 21st century innovation. Similarly, a substantial number of medical schools have integrated humanities coursework into their programs to enhance the cultural knowledge and observational abilities of their graduates with the goal of providing higher quality, more efficient care. Recognizing the role that the humanities play in fostering innovation, countries such as China and India have begun to integrate the humanities into their own education systems.

Productive Global Engagement

As they deal with increasingly complex international relationships, both business and military leaders look to the humanities to provide critical knowledge about communities throughout the world. These leaders argue that our ability to engage productively with the world depends on the deep knowledge of the languages, cultures, and histories of rapidly changing areas of the world, which the humanities cultivate and maintain. Historians, linguists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and literature scholars among others spend years learning about communities and their deep roots, thereby gaining expertise that may inform those who seek to work in these geographic areas. As the former Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, recently said in his address to the National Humanities Alliance Annual Meeting, when we fail to cultivate this knowledge there can be grave costs (will get quote from video).

Strong Communities

Finally, with the decline in critical, community-based social institutions, communities throughout our own country are trying to foster a sense of shared identity and responsibility. In doing so, they rely on the humanities to preserve and explore their history and traditions in order to promote the understanding of common ideals, enduring civic values, and shared cultural heritage. To strengthen communities, humanities councils, museums, libraries, and universities produce vital programs that promote understanding among diverse communities through the cultivation and exchange of knowledge about cultural heritage and history.

The Central Role of NEH

The National Endowment for the Humanities is organized into Federal/State Partnerships, the division that supports humanities councils that provide engaging programs in every state and territory; Competitive Grants, which awards peer-reviewed grants in Research, Education, Preservation, Digital Humanities, Challenge Grants, and Public Programs divisions; and Special Initiatives, which awards funds through its Bridging Cultures initiative to projects that promote

understanding among diverse communities. In this testimony, I will focus on the NEH Competitive Grants in order to illustrate the central role that NEH funding plays in supporting critical humanities work.

Each year, NEH awards hundreds of competitive, peer-reviewed grants to individual scholars and a broad range of nonprofit educational organizations around the country. Grantees include universities, two- and four-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. Through its competitive grants programs, NEH supports the preservation of collections that would be otherwise lost, path-breaking research that brings critical knowledge to light, programs for teachers that enrich instruction in schools, and public programs that reach individuals and communities in every district in the country. There is a high likelihood that someone from your district has benefited from this funding. To make this concrete, I'll provide two illustrative examples in the following paragraphs.

Salafi Networks in Southeast Asia

In one case, a team from the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict at Arizona State University received a grant from NEH to study varieties of Salafism. In the words of the team's lead researcher, who brings more than 30 years of experience studying religion in Southeast Asia to the project, "[s]alafism is the driving force behind movements ranging from al Qaeda to quietist groups living pious lives in self-imposed isolation... Because these diverse groups share religious teaching and symbols, scholars, policymakers, and intelligence analysts often have difficulty distinguishing between violent and nonviolent Salafis." Clearly this distinction is critical for maintaining both our national security and productive diplomatic relations, and this grant provides the knowledge. A book and a series of policy white papers will result from this particular grant that will make the knowledge gained from the team's research widely available to other scholars, policy makers, and others.

Folger Shakespeare Library: Summer Institute

At the NEH Summer Institute hosted by the Folger Shakespeare Library, teachers attend intensive seminars with distinguished Shakespeare scholars and work with our unique resources and collections. The experience enhances teachers' ability to integrate research into their teaching allowing them to create the kind of stimulating project-based learning opportunities that transform students into lifelong learners. NEH grants for teaching institutes, such as the one at the Folger Library, promote the deep knowledge of humanities subject matter that is critical to ensuring that initiatives such as the Common Core standards succeed in improving academic attainment for all Americans. Through these transformative workshops, teachers become excited about the subjects they teach and then communicate their enthusiasm to students, making the classrooms exhilarating places to learn.

Given the important role of projects such as these, we are especially concerned about the decline in funding for the NEH competitive grants that support them. In the past, NEH's rigorous evaluation process has determined that a greater number of projects than the agency is currently able to fund were worthy of support. As a result of recent cuts, NEH is now able to make fewer grants for 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.

Although modest, the increased support proposed by the President would have a significant impact. For example, at the proposed FY 2014 level, the NEH Research Division could make 48 more awards than in FY 2013. This means that an additional 44 individual scholars could receive fellowships, and four more collaborative research projects could receive continuing support. This kind of support is vital for humanities faculty. It enables recipients to devote themselves to intensive, systematic research—the kind of research needed to produce new understandings of American and world history and literature. NEH’s continuing support can enable a long-term project to continue, leveraging additional institutional support, and providing unique research opportunities for participating graduate and undergraduate students. Similarly, the NEH Education Research Division could enable 530 additional teachers to revitalize their knowledge of the humanities through participation in summer workshops; approximately 66,000 high school students would benefit from this valuable professional development for teachers.

Conclusion

This Subcommittee stands as steward of many of our nation’s greatest shared natural and cultural resources. We recognize that Congress faces difficult choices in this and coming years. Nevertheless, we ask the Subcommittee to consider modestly increased 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.

The National Humanities Alliance was founded in 1981 to advance public support for the humanities. With 104 organizational members, the Alliance encompasses a broad range of humanities-related disciplines and institutions, and is the only organization that represents the humanities community as a whole. Its 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.