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State Humanities Committees (1979-1982): Memorandum 01

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MEMORANDUM

Feb. 21, 1979

TO: Senator and Tom
FROM: ADC
SUBJECT: State Humanities Committees

Following your visit to Baylor University last week, I received a number of calls from people in the State Humanities Committee network. Jim Veninga (Director of the Texas Committee) who I gather you had a good talk with, was one of the callers. The word had spread that you had spoken to a small lunch group of Baylor faculty and Humanities people and, in the course of your remarks, had addressed the issue of state agency status for the Humanities Committees.

Jim was surprised when you came out so strongly in favor of turning the Committees into official state agencies - like the Arts Councils are now. Since you last pushed for this change in the 1976 reauthorization, many positive changes have come about in the way these Committees operate themselves. So the call for "official" agencies is perhaps less urgent and less prudent than it seemed then.

From what I can piece together the 1975-76 period was really the beginning of the State Humanities movement. Some Committees had already existed for a few years but this period marked their coming of age with national attention suddenly focused on them. The state-based program at NEH was just getting underway with its block-grant support system. Now, four years later, these Committees have implemented many significant changes - in large part due to the points you made during the hearings in 1975.

At that time you were especially concerned with elements such as accountability vis-a-vis the Federal Government, the potential problems of self-perpetuating Committees, and the confusion resulting from the fact that the arts and humanities were paired under one "commission" in many states.

Each of these areas has evolved substantially over the last four years. There is now a firmly established full-fledged Committee focusing specifically on the Humanities in each state. The NEH provides an annual block grant to each

Committee which forms the backbone of the program budget. Some of the more enlightened states contribute funds to their Committees voluntarily. The NEH block-grant used to be the same to each state but it is now based on a formula having to do with population.

The methods by which Committee members are selected varies from state to state. Each Committee, however, has imposed strict rules regarding terms of membership to insure frequent rotation. In Texas, for example, there is an open nomination process and each member is limited to one 4-year term. In Rhode Island there is a limit of two 2-year terms. Most Committees have at least two members who are appointed by the Governor. This is the case in Rhode Island where Bob Pirraglia and Lorraine Silberthau, both on the Governor's staff, are Committee members. But neither one has been seen at a Humanities Committee meeting since they were appointed.

The importance of having State House representation, however, is widely acknowledged and the Governors are kept abreast of program developments - although many Governors are simply not interested. Committee members represent an increasingly broad spectrum of each state's population. (I will check on figures for organized labor's representation. This was a special concern of yours in 1975). At the same time there is almost unanimous sentiment for maintaining the volunteer status of each Committee.

Rhode Island has, unfortunately, become a case in point. More than half of the slots on the State Arts Council have been vacant for over a year. These appointments have been stalled in the Governor's office due to delicate political considerations. Because of the delay the Arts Council has not even had a quorum at its meetings over the last few months. (Mr. Cohen, the opera impresario from New port has been lobbying for an appointment to the Council and is partly responsible for Garrahy's delay. Also Don Aldrich, the Council Chairman, has not been as aggressive as he might be in pressuring the Governor for some action).

It all boils down to a kind of hopeless paralysis because of the political appointment process. The R.I. Humanities Committee, on the other hand, has a full Committee which represents every corner of the State (except Woonsocket) and a wide variety of disciplines. The staff is small (3 people) with little overhead so the emphasis can truly be placed on programs. I sense a more committed, thoughtful approach at the Humanities Committee than at the Arts Council where the partisan appointments really have seemed to impair the credibility of the organization. (The dispute between CITIART and the Council is another symptom of this problem).

One very interesting point is that all of the State Humanities people I have talked with would prefer to forego the increased funding that the state link-up would bring in favor of keeping the volunteer aspect of these "citizen's committees". No group, to my knowledge, is seeking any legislation to change the system as it is now set up.

I regret that we didn't talk about this issue before your Texas trip. I have discussed it with Humanities people at length but since I lack the first-hand experience of being involved from the beginning, perhaps there are some important elements that I am overlooking.

This topic will undoubtedly come up at the lunch with Jack Neusner and Joe Duffey tomorrow (Thursday). The Endowment, by the way, continues to oppose turning the Committees into state agencies but I am basing my comments on what I actually see happening in the states and not on the Endowment's position. Nevertheless, Joe is anxious to avoid a confrontation on this issue. Your comments in Texas have made the states and NEH very nervous and they are eager for clarification.

As Jim Veninga pointed out to you there should be a way of allowing for options. One way of doing this would be to revise this section of the legislation so as to invite and permit state involvement on a more extensive level. A state Committee could if they so wished go all the way to becoming a state agency or go part way so as to preserve the volunteer status of the Committee and thereby "protect" it from too much state involvement. I find the option idea very appealing. You could stipulate as well that each state Committee have established links to the Governor's office and if the state makes a financial contribution to the Committee, the number of Governor's appointees could be as many as half.

These are the types of issues I hope you will discuss with Joe. The State Committees have really developed beyond the point of whether or not they should be official state agencies. Their former grass roots image has now become a sophisticated and exciting one that continues to develop well - and I think you can help them along more effectively by fine-tuning the present program rather than altering it completely.

On April 9 and 10, the Humanities Endowment will be hosting the entire leadership of the State Committees - the Chairman and Director from each state. The visit is set to coincide with the Jefferson Lecture.

Joe would like to have an invitational lunch for this group on the Hill on Tuesday, April 10. He wants you to be one of the co-sponsors. John Brademas has been asked to be the other one and has accepted. Your names would go out on the invitations.

In addition to the state leaders - about 25 Congressional people will be invited as well as 20 special guests such as Joan Mondale and Peter Kyros. A total of about 150.

There will be no major speech - just greetings and comments from you, Brademas, Duffey and perhaps Joan Mondale if she comes.

In light of this larger issue, the lunch will become an important forum at which those attending will be expecting to hear something on the state Committee question. I don't think the lunch should be a platform for high drama in which you and Duffey are painted in opposite corners. I suggest discussing the "option" idea tomorrow and then we can develop a more substantive position to bring to the state leaders over the next few weeks.

I recommend that you co-sponsor the April 10 lunch. These state people are potentially your strongest supporters in the Humanities community.