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Arts and Humanities: Reports (1979-1980): Speech 01

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For Sandy Cray
re: Senator Pell's remarks to
The State Based Humanities
Conference April 10 Washington

Whenever public tax dollars are employed in a project or a cause, there is an inescapable responsibility that they be applied in a fair and efficient manner. Regardless of whether they are municipal, state or federal funds, the implications are the same. The responsibility for their use in the public interest goes beyond compliance with specific provisions of contracts, grants, or agreements; it goes to the basic ethical and moral principles of stewardship and public trusteeship. That the press and newsmedia is full of daily breaches of this faith is no indicator that the responsibility should be relaxed and the rules need no longer apply. The current vogue word for this principle is "accountability." The concept applies to the programs and administration of the state-based humanities programs as much as any other federally funded activity.

"Accountability" assumes a "public," a "constituency," or an auditing mechanism of some kind. Accountability is also more than a mere financial revelation and record-keeping process as to the proper expenditure of public funds. My definition of accountability also includes the directions and the decisions determining the expenditures of those funds.

At present, the state-based programs of the humanities committees exist in an anomalous situation, suspended half-way between a federal agency and the public of a state. The only mechanisms of control and counsel are the national endowment staff and the citizen boards comprising the committees. The membership of the committees is largely self-perpetuating, with little formal provision for external, broad public influence. My suggestion that the state committees move in the direction of being a part of state government, towards a status comparable to state arts councils, is an effort to eliminate abuses of accountability, and inaccessibility where they have been manifest, and to avoid this development in areas where they might arise.

The purpose of the state-based humanities program is to create and support an exchange on the state level between humanists and the broadest general public. It is to enrich the lives of the general citizen by providing access to the humanities and to humanists in programs beyond those normally confined within institutions of higher learning. To my mind, these opportunities have the best chance of happening and being successful in an atmosphere where the committees respond to state constituencies and are responsible to the conventional apparatus of state public affairs -- in short, state government.

This is not to say I am unaware that state bureaucracy can be as stultifying as any which operates on the banks of the Potomac, nor am I oblivious to the danger of opening state committees to the importunities of political patronage. Although I would argue that political importunities and academic opportunists are to be equally abhorred. Yet, the risk we run in any publicly funded operation is that there will be abuses. There are abuses now under the present system; safeguards can be built in to avoid the worst excesses of state bureaucracy while providing for both accessibility and accountability.

Lastly, perhaps too much has been made of the invidious comparisons between state arts councils and humanities committees in the area of visibility. By their nature, arts councils which sponsor performing groups or support the public display of art or art forms, are likely to be more visible than humanities forums. There are established audiences that arts groups deal with; performances by their nature are likely to attract attention and publicity. Nonetheless, state humanities committees have often too easily and too quickly assumed they would attract small audiences, and as a self-fulfilling prophecy have done little to convoke or provoke them. Virtually, a sine qua non of any governmental agency after acquiring an obligatory photo of the President, the governor or the mayor is to employ a public information officer. That such a person is not standard equipment among our state committees raises the question in my mind as to how hard they are trying to be accessible and visible to the general non-academic adult public. While I hardly want to be an advocate for free-wheeling press-agentry, of all the programs most in need of intelligent and unceasing interpretation and explanation, the state-based humanities programs are perhaps the least understood and appreciated. Additional operational funding for information dispersal might be one of the first dividends derived from a closer link with state government. If the heart and center of a humanistic experience is the transmission of our culture from one person to another, perhaps we need to emphasize the transmitting process in the work of the committees themselves.

and perhaps a
area where your
own fellowmen can
take an increasingly
important role

These programs are, to
my mind, the single most
important element in
the total humanities
support picture