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June 13, 1990

Rex O. Arney, Esq.
General Counsel and Congressional Liaison
National Endowment for the Humanities
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Rex:

I am grateful for your willingness to discuss further the issue of dissertation support for humanities graduate students. It is clear from our recent conversation that there are two questions that need to be answered concerning our proposal for an NEH dissertation fellowship program: why is such a program needed, and why should NEH administer it?

A dissertation fellowship program is needed because the dissertation stage is the most difficult period for humanities students to secure financial support during their doctoral study. Graduate students in the humanities are supported primarily by teaching assistantships, their own and their spouses' earnings, and university fellowships.¹ None of these forms of support reliably carries students through their dissertation to degree completion. In the sciences, students frequently are supported as research assistants during their dissertation work; the work for which these students are paid is their dissertation research.

Such support is rarely available to humanities graduate students. All too often, humanities graduate students must work part-time during their dissertation research, extending their time-to-degree. Note that such work is almost always in lieu of, rather than part of their dissertation research. In the worst case, students leave their graduate programs to save money through full time work, and never return to complete their dissertations.

1. According to the National Research Council's latest report (Summary Report 1988; Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities), the principal sources of financial support for graduate study for 1988 humanities doctorate recipients were: teaching assistantships, 28%; own earnings, 26%; spouses' earnings, 12%; and university fellowships, 10%. Federally funded fellowships and traineeships accounted for 2.5% of their support.
The second question to be answered is why NEH should be the agency to administer a dissertation fellowship program. The National Endowment for the Humanities is the only agency organized to administer a competively funded dissertation fellowship program. One of NEH's core activities is support of humanistic research and scholarship through the granting of peer-reviewed NEH fellowships. Since the dissertation is generally the first major research project for future humanities scholars, an NEH dissertation fellowship program would simply extend support for its future clientele to its starting point.

The program we propose would be administered as a research grant program, not a student aid program in the traditional sense. Thus, proposals would be evaluated by peer review panels in much the same way as NEH fellowship proposals currently are evaluated. Only NEH has access to the breadth and caliber of faculty necessary to conduct effective peer review.

Even a modestly funded program could have a substantial impact. Roughly 3,000 U.S. citizens earned humanities doctorates in 1988. A program awarding fellowships of $18,000 to 600 graduate student would cost $10.8 million annually. Although such a program would provide direct support to only 1/5 of the U.S. citizens earning doctorates annually, the fellowships awarded would be assisting some of the most promising future teachers and scholars to complete their education. Moreover, the message that such a program would convey—that the federal government recognizes the importance of encouraging the highest levels of education in the humanities as well as the sciences—would extend broadly to faculty and students in the humanities.

The dissertation fellowship proposal has been discussed recently in the context of analyses projecting a Ph.D. shortage. We believe that the evidence for an impending shortage of Ph.D.s, in the humanities as well as the sciences and engineering, is persuasive. A dissertation fellowship program could attenuate that shortage by increasing retention rates and reducing time-to-degree.

Let me emphasize, though, that responding to the projected shortage is neither the sole nor the principal purpose of such a program. Any such effect is likely to be small, particularly with a program of the size we have proposed. The principal purpose of a dissertation fellowship program is to assist students who have already committed a number of years to graduate study to complete their doctoral programs and pursue the next stage of their careers.
We recognize that the current authorizing language for NEH allows support for a dissertation fellowship program. However, the current opposition by NEH to such a program obviously does not give us confidence that what is possible will become actual.

From our point of view, the strongest outcome would be statutory language mandating that NEH administer a dissertation fellowship program. Quite apart from whether we could achieve such an objective, I appreciate your concern about adding specific requirements to what remains an admirably general authority.

An alternative would be strong report language expressing concern about the difficulty humanities graduate students have in securing financial support and urging NEH to develop a dissertation program to address that problem.

As you know, we will continue to press for creation of such a program. We would like to work with NEH in the development of that program. I hope that we can continue to discuss this issue and see if we can’t reach agreement on a common position.

With best regards,

Sincerely,

[Signature]
John C. Vaughn
Director of Federal Relations

JCV/kem