Statement of the National Humanities Alliance on the National Council on the Humanities

Since its establishment in 1965, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has become the single most important institution supporting scholarship and other humanities activities in the United States. In the words of William G. Bowen, President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation: "It is not an exaggeration to say that the decisions made concerning the budget for NEH ... and subsequent administration of the funds have an absolutely decisive impact on the health and character of the humanities in America."

For this reason, the National Humanities Alliance (NHA), a coalition of seventy scholarly and other organizations concerned with the humanities in this country, wishes to reiterate its full support for the NEH and to emphasize the importance of the composition of the National Council on the Humanities to the general functioning of the NEH. We do so now because the terms of nine of the twenty-six members of the Council expire in January 1992.

The authorizing legislation assigns the following responsibilities to the National Council on the Humanities: (a) advising the Chairman of the NEH on policies, programs, and procedures for carrying out the Chairman's functions and (b) reviewing and making recommendations to the Chairman on the applications for financial support submitted to the Endowment.
These responsibilities call for Council members who bring a range of expertise and breadth of experience to their work on the Council. The diversity of Council members' interests and backgrounds determines the kind of advice they can provide on grant decisions, policies, and procedures.

Scholars, educators, and other citizens working in the humanities view the Council as serving the Endowment and the general humanities community in a way that parallels the leadership provided by the National Science Board, although they recognize that the science panel is vested with far greater authority as well as resources.

The legislation requires that NEH Council members be appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. The statute requires that Council members must: 1) be private U.S. citizens; 2) be "recognized for their broad knowledge of, expertise in, or commitment to the humanities"; and 3) "have established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity." Further, Council members must "provide a comprehensive representation of the views of scholars and professional practitioners in the humanities and of the public throughout the United States." In other words, Council members must bring not only the highest qualifications but also a broad range of perspectives, which is critical to the effectiveness of such a body. We recognize that the legislation calls for representation of the views of both
scholars and the public, and, in fact, the Council has included both scholarly and public members since the beginning, although there are no reserved "scholarly" or "public" seats on the Council.

The National Humanities Alliance urges that scholars nominated to serve on the Council have the credentials called for in the legislation. Likewise, individuals nominated from among the general public should have records of strong commitment to the humanities. Further, we urge on-going attention to achieving the comprehensive representation -- across disciplines and intellectual viewpoints -- that is called for in the legislation.

Finally, the NHA notes the directive in the legislation to consider "recommendations" on Council appointments "by leading national organizations concerned with the humanities." Such organizations, whose primary commitments are to the work of the humanities, can be helpful in identifying individuals representing a range of viewpoints who are actively engaged in scholarship as well as the public humanities.

1. The National Humanities Alliance (NHA) was formed in 1981 to unify the public interest in support of federal programs in the humanities. The NHA is the only coalition that represents the humanities as a whole: Scholarly and professional associations; organizations of museums, libraries, historical societies, higher education, and state humanities councils; university and independent centers for scholarship; and other organizations concerned with national humanities policies. The Alliance also speaks in behalf of individuals engaged in research, writing, teaching, and public presentations in the humanities.
2. William G. Bowen's testimony was presented 17 March 1988 on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance before the Interior and Related Agencies Subcommittee at a hearing regarding the Fiscal Year 1989 appropriation for NEH.

3. The National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965 (P.L. 89-209). All quotations of the legislation are drawn from the compilation of the law through 1986 (the most recent compilation) but with cognizance of changes enacted through the 1990 reauthorization.

4. The legislation states that "the term 'humanities' includes, but is not limited to, the study and interpretation of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism, and theory of the arts; those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life."