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Humanities Groups Guardedly Welcome Panel's Vote to Limit, Not Ban, 'Re-Grants'

By CHRISTOPHER MYERS

WASHINGTON

Humanities organizations last week reacted with guarded relief to the decision by a Congressional panel to restrict rather than prohibit the National Endowment for the Humanities' practice of "re-granting" federal funds—making block grants to organizations that in turn make smaller individual grants to scholars.

After threatening to abolish re-granting, the House of Representatives panel that handles spending for the humanities endowment and the National Endowment for the Arts instead voted late last month to approve a report, accompanying the appropriations bill for the agencies, that calls on the two endowments to make the final decisions on all re-grant awards.

Humanities officials said the decision was a reasonable compromise. They expressed concern, however, that submitting all proposed re-grants to the endowments for a final review could bog down an already long process. Some also said they feared that the pending legislation, scheduled to be voted on by the full House this week, might clear the way for harmful cutbacks in re-granting in the future.

'Sounds Fairly Workable'

Kent Mullikin, associate director of the National Humanities Center, which annually sponsors about 40 fellowships, 10 of which are financed with N.E.H. re-grant mon-

ey, said: "This sounds fairly workable. But one of course worries that this may be the camel's nose. When a federal agency is given this kind of oversight, what one fears is that you will begin to be told that so-and-so is not an acceptable recipient."

Mr. Mullikin said that he did not think further restriction of re-granting was a concern with the current endowment administration, but he added: "What you have to keep in mind is that when you pass a law it functions for posterity."

Many humanities groups depend heavily on endowment re-grant money to support fellowship programs they run, and endowment officials have said that some re-grant agencies, especially in the area of international scholarship, do work that the endowment would have trouble conducting on its own.

The move to modify re-granting followed a recent conflict over the arts endowment's support of two controversial exhibits—one of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe, including images that were criticized as homoerotic or obscene (see Page B4), and another that included a work by Andres Serrano that depicted the crucified Jesus submerged in urine.

The Mapplethorpe exhibit was scheduled to be shown at the Corcoran Gallery of Art here this month, but gallery officials canceled it following the Congressional criticism.

Rep. Sidney Yates, Democrat of

Illinois and chairman of the House appropriations panel that handles spending for the endowments, had said that he might propose a measure to prohibit re-granting.

But after meeting with the heads of the two endowments, Mr. Yates, a long-time Congressional supporter of the arts and humanities, softened his stand and chose to address re-granting only in the report accompanying the panel's appropriations bill.

Both Lynne V. Cheney, chair-

"How is the endowment going to review the applications in any timely fashion?"

man of the humanities endowment, and Hugh Southern, acting chairman of the arts endowment, had been "quite emphatic in asserting the necessity of continuing sub-granting," Mr. Yates wrote in the report.

Although report language does not carry the force of law, Mrs. Cheney said the intent of the committee was clearly to modify existing re-grant procedures. The humanities endowment would be ignoring "Congressional will" if it didn't change its procedure, she said.

Mrs. Cheney said the increased involvement of the endowment would "take a few more people," but that the agency had been looking at its re-grant policy anyway and wanted to exercise more control.

Mrs. Cheney would not say whether the endowment would stop giving re-grant money to any of the organizations that currently receive it, but she said the agency would have to be sure that the groups weren't doing work the endowment could do itself.

Humanities representatives said the agency already conducted rigorous reviews of the procedures of the groups that award endowment re-grant money.

Said Mr. Mullikin of the National Humanities Center: "Once they're satisfied that we're running a good program, they're not interested in getting into the details. They don't tell us who we should choose or who we should reject."

But the proposed language in the report would change that situation, inserting the endowment into the decision-making process, and that may complicate matters, say humanities representatives.

Marcus A. McCorison, director and librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, which re-grants three or four endowment fellowships a year, said his organization's application process was carefully designed to give scholars adequate time to make plans for travel and study. Inserting another step in the

process—endowment review and approval—might cause considerable delays, he said.

"I don't see quite how you could lengthen the process. How is the endowment going to review the applications in any timely fashion?" he said.

Said Richard H. Brown, academic vice-president of the Newberry Library, which finances five or six fellowships with endowment money annually: "It would be very cumbersome."

Concern Over Private Support

A spokesman for the endowment said it was "too early" to comment on how the revamped review process might work.

Mr. Mullikin said that increased regulation by Congress could endanger one of the most important benefits that re-granting groups derive from their relationship with the endowment—attraction of private money, often in the form of matching funds. He said that because of the endowment's stature, organizations that receive endowment money gain recognition and legitimacy, and private donors are more likely to give money to those organizations.

Groups that lost federal re-grant money would also lose matching private support, and even in those cases where re-granting continued, the controversy generated by Congressional scrutiny could have a chilling effect on private support of the humanities, he said.