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Humanities Endowment Weighs Closer Supervision of Organizations That ‘Re-Grant’ Its Funds

By CHRISTOPHER MYERS

WASHINGTON

The National Endowment for the Humanities is reviewing its relationship with "re-grant" agencies—organizations that take federal funds from the endowment and pass them on to scholars in the form of fellowships, grants, and stipends.

Endowment officials say they do not plan any radical changes in their ties to re-grant organizations. But they add that they worry that the N.E.H. may not exercise enough oversight over the groups, that some of the groups may have become too dependent on N.E.H. support, and that some of them may not make fellowship decisions based on objective criteria.

This year, about half of the roughly 900 fellowships awarded with endowment funds were distributed by re-grant agencies.

Lynne V. Cheney, chairman of the endowment, said of the review: "We just want to take a big look at it. There's no particular goal."

Mrs. Cheney said it was important for the members of the National Council on the Humanities, "who see themselves very much as stewards of the humanities, to know where the money is going." She added that the council wanted to be sure that the re-granting agencies were not conducting work that the N.E.H. could or should be doing.

Said Leon R. Kass, vice-chairman of the National Council on the Humanities: "I think the general presumption is in favor of the N.E.H.'s exercising its own review and judgment on the awards it makes."

But he added that cases did exist where other organizations had knowledge of specific academic fields that made them better suited to manage the fellowships.

Controversy at Arts Endowment

Although the N.E.H. review of its grant policies was not spurred by any particular event, it coincided by chance with a recent controversy about similar practices of the National Endowment for the Arts. The arts endowment came under fire from members

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of Congress last month when an art work, partially financed by the N.E.H. through a re-granting organi- zation, was widely assailed as offen- sive. The work is a photograph of an image of the crucified Jesus submerged in urine.

Because of that controversy and because both endowments are con- tracting to re-examine and possibly re-authorizing this year, N.E.H.'s re- grant review appears particularly timely. "In retrospect, we look bril- liant," Mrs. Cheney said.

Mutually Beneficial Relations

Officials of both the N.E.H. and the re-grant organizations said that their groups had a mutually beneficial relation- ship: The endowment provides important support to the various fel- lowship foundations and the re-grant organizations distribute funds to a broad range of scholars.

Many N.E.H. observers say that the re-grant agencies help extend endow- ment money to fields and scholar- ships that the agency on its own might not otherwise reach.

Said John Hamer, director of the National Humanities Alliance, a co- alition of humanities organizations: "Some of the re-grant agencies are able to do very specialized work. They can pay sustained attention to an area of scholarship and help develop the field in a way it would be difficult for the N.E.H. to do directly."

This is particularly true of founda- tions that deal with international scholarship, he said. One such a- gent is the International Research and Exchanges Board, known as IREX, which promotes and supports Ameri- can humanities and social science re- search in Eastern Europe and the So- viet Union as well as exchanges be- tween scholars from the United States and Eastern bloc countries.

IREX, Mrs. Cheney said, does what the endowment "just isn't in a position to do."

Both IREX and another re-grant agency that supports international scholarship, the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, have extensive experience in working with scholarly institutions in their respec- tive countries, and would be difficult to replace, said Douglas Greenberg, vice-president of the American Council of Learned Societies, which also receives re-grant money from the endowment.

"It would be like inventing the wheel," Mr. Greenberg said. "If you didn't have IREX and C.S.C.P.R.C., you'd need something just like them."

'Absolutely Critical Margin'

But if the endowment cuts on the re-grant agencies to extend its money into hard-to-reach areas of scholarship, some of the re-grant agencies are even more dependent on the endowment.

IREX receives about $1 million of its annual $6 million budget from the N.E.H., and that is "an absolutely critical margin," said Allen Kass, IREX executive director.

"We would go under without that money," he said.

And the endowment's support of re-grant organizations goes beyond money, he said, adding: "Their un- derstanding and their appreciation of the work we do is very keen."

The largest of the re-grant a- gencies is the American Council of Learned Societies. That group, which has been receiving N.E.H. re-