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David Bartel

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Endowments face new challenge

By Dave Bartel
Herald Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — After years of being accused of promoting "elitism," the National Endowment for the Humanities faces a new charge from a new administration.

The humanities endowment and its sister, the National Endowment for the Arts, have become "politicized" and, therefore, too populist in the view of some advisers to President Ronald Reagan.

That view, apparently part of a still unsettled debate among Reagan aides, could lead to an overhaul of the way the two federal agencies go about awarding more than \$300 million to artists, scholars, museums and thousands of other groups and individuals.

Part of the debate became clear shortly after the November elections when the conservative Heritage Foundation issued a highly critical report on the two endowments.

The report called for renewed emphasis on "serious art" and "scholarly excellence" after what it called a general lowering of standards under the Carter administration.

For example, in reviewing the humanities endowment the report concluded: "A major issue in redirecting and reorganizing the agency will be to establish the principle of scholarly excellence as the criterion for budgeting and program definition."

The report called for eliminating such things as "guidelines for racial or ethnic quotas applied to the grant-review and evaluation process." The report also attacked what it called "political" grants, such as \$200,000 the humanities agency provided in 1980 for film forums, classes and other activities exploring the struggles faced by working women.

Some other unofficial advisers to the new president, such as economist Milton Friedman, have called for outright elimination of the humanities endowment.

How much of this advice eventually becomes policy under the Reagan administration remains unclear.

"We don't know at this point what may happen," said Barry Wanger, public affairs director for the humanities endowment. "We hear all kinds of rumors about our budget being cut anywhere from 5 percent to 30 percent, but so far there's been no definite word on any of it."

The endowments, created by Congress in 1965, were accused for years of supporting only elite artists and scholars, usually in big Eastern cities.

The new criticism stems in part from the Carter administration's effort to broaden the

endowments' activities into areas with mass appeal.

That has meant not only providing a \$315,000 grant to the New York Philharmonic, but paying for exhibits in small towns on the history of Plains Indians or training Montana residents in oral history techniques to preserve the local heritage.

This so-called "popularization" of the humanities endowment's work, has been encouraged by past session of Congress, partly in response to the "elitism" charge.

In 1971, Congress passed legislation to create humanities councils in each state, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico "to increase public understanding and appreciation of the humanities."

In 1976, Congress broadened the role of the state councils, required wider public representation on the councils and set aside 20 percent of NEH's budget to the states.

The state councils, generally made up of 10 scholars and 10 public representatives such as farmers, doctors, merchants or civic leaders, determine how their grant money will be spent.

"Each state council determines its own mission, establishes its own program guidelines and procedures for soliciting and reviewing proposals and produces its own brochures and application forms," a recent NEH report said.

The amount of money available to each state is set by law. In fiscal year 1981, for example, the state grant program received \$23.9 million out of NEH's \$156.3 million budget.

The formula requires that 75 percent of the total be split equally among the state councils and the remaining 25 percent is divided according to population.

The congressional formula assures that a sparsely populated state will get a share of the endowment money to spend as its own council sees fit.

Within broad NEH guidelines, such as "reaching underserved groups" and "helping preserve cultural resources," the state council is free to pursue its own objectives.

In the past year, that has resulted in a wide variety of different proposals receiving state grant money.

In addition to funds controlled by the state council, individuals or groups also can obtain grants directly from NEH's national council.

Two such grants were approved for North Dakota last May. One provides \$41,593 to the state Historical Society to assist it in being "the state's historical interpreter."

The other grant of \$175,000 plus \$50,000 in gift and match money went to Demetrius Georgacas at the University of North Dakota for work on a comprehensive modern Greek-English dictionary.