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Iannone, Carol: Letters Opposing Nomination of (1991): Correspondence 23

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MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

10 ASTOR PLACE

NEW YORK, NY 10003

25 March 1991

Lynne V. Cheney
Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Lynne:

I read with interest your letter of 15 March regarding the MLA's letter of 4 March to Senator Edward M. Kennedy, and I write to correct several misunderstandings. You will be pleased to learn that we are not so far apart after all.

Let me say first that the MLA Executive Council is in full agreement with your position that "The NEH should be advised by a Council characterized by a diversity of scholars--and public members as well." The legislation wisely calls for "a comprehensive representation of the views of scholars and professional practitioners in the humanities and of the public throughout the United States." The MLA Executive Council is also fully supportive of the other legislative requirement regarding appointments to the NEH National Council, that council members should "have established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity."

In short, we endorse the principle of comprehensive representation and the requirement of a record of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity. The two criteria are, of course, entirely compatible.

Second, I must take issue with your assertion that my letter to Senator Kennedy assumes "that only one kind of academic is suited to be on the Council: someone from a research university who publishes in journals like Publications of the Modern Language Association." I made no such statement in my letter; indeed, I and the other members of the MLA Executive Council never even thought of such a standard, which, frankly, we would regard as absurd.

Third, I am puzzled by your assertion that I placed undue reliance on the study of the NEH National Council undertaken by the National Humanities Alliance. In fact, I relied on that study for only one point: the decline in the representation of college and university administrators and of

college and university faculty members in the humanities on the NEH council from the 1970s to 1990. Looking at the public information provided by the NEH over the years about the backgrounds of NEH council members, one can see there has been a decline in the representation of these groups.

Fourth, I want to reassure you that the MLA does value teaching. The MLA was founded in 1883 by a group of teachers who were committed to both scholarship and teaching, and it has taken these commitments seriously throughout the century. In recent years the MLA has carried out or is in the process of administering the following relevant projects.

The MLA was key in the development of the English Coalition Conference, which was held in 1987 and brought together teachers from all levels of schooling to consider improvements in the teaching of English. This project was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Exxon Education Foundation, and the NEH.

The MLA conceptualized and developed institutes for supervisors of school and coordinators of college foreign language programs who influence foreign language curricula and enhance teachers' effectiveness. This project, which began in 1988, has been funded by the University of Texas at Austin, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the NEH.

The MLA developed and continues to publish a unique series, Approaches to Teaching World Literature. These books are widely used by teachers. The series includes more than thirty titles and deals with such important literature as the Iliad and the Odyssey, King Lear, Moby-Dick, Paradise Lost, Wordsworth's poetry, Invisible Man, My Antonia, and David Copperfield.

The MLA developed two conferences on issues concerning literacy education in higher education, the schools, and other community settings, including the workplace. Each conference attracted 600 attendees; the first was held in Columbus, Ohio, in 1988; the second in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1990. Support for these meetings came from various state humanities councils, Ohio State University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the Hewlett Foundation. I append a statement from the participants of the Pittsburgh conference who represented organized labor. This statement suggests that the MLA has successfully served the educational needs of more than an elite.

The MLA developed and is now administering a three-year project aimed at improving curricula and enhancing faculty development at colleges and universities. The MLA has received a grant for this project from the Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

For an organization of its size, the MLA has provided substantial support for teaching. We see no contradiction between working to strengthen scholarship and striving to improve teaching.

Finally, I turn to the question of Carol Iannone's nomination. You indicate that she will represent undergraduate teaching on the NEH council. Certainly everyone would agree that this humanities activity deserves strong support, and therefore the representative of this sector of the humanities should have broad and substantial experience. Obviously, Carol Iannone has been a teacher for some time. The question is, can she bring the depth of experience such a representative should have?

According to Department of Education estimates, there were over 45,000 full-time faculty members in the humanities in 1988, and of these over 30,000 hold tenured positions. I believe that a good portion of this second group is likely to have a fuller understanding than Dr. Iannone has of the departmental and institutional planning and decision making that influence what happens in college and university undergraduate classrooms. (They might also, by the way, come from a state other than New York, which seems overly represented on the NEH council--with three of the twenty-six seats.)

The record of Dr. Iannone's teaching experience indicates that she has been employed primarily as an adjunct professor. As you know, adjunct professors rarely participate fully in the departmental and institutional considerations that result in the development of curricula and courses. Similarly, adjunct professors rarely participate fully--if at all--in debates and decisions affecting faculty hiring and promotion, the development of general education courses and requirements, the major, and institutional assessments of various kinds. Normally, these matters are the responsibility of the full-time regular faculty. We believe Dr. Iannone's perspective on undergraduate teaching is likely to be narrower than it would have been if she had held a regular full-time faculty position.

As for Dr. Iannone's publishing record, you believe she is "a well-published writer on contemporary cultural matters." Though others might disagree, I will not quarrel with your view that she is "well-published," but I hope the Senate committee understands that as a writer on contemporary cultural matters, Carol Iannone is not a George Will or a William Buckley.

Even if one does not evaluate Carol Iannone's record from the perspective of scholarly achievement, a nomination for service on the NEH council still seems premature. As the MLA said in its letter to Senator Kennedy, Dr. Iannone's record is not without merit; it is simply without distinction.

I'm sorry that we do not agree on this particular issue; however, I know that we share many important values. I and the other members of the MLA Executive Council recognize the leadership and administrative ability you bring to your work. We think that you, the NEH, and the humanities community deserve the strongest possible appointments to the NEH council.

Sincerely yours,



Phyllis Franklin
Executive Director