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State Humanities Committees (1979-1982): Correspondence 19

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nebraska
committee
for the
humanities

JUL 23 1979

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July 20, 1979

Mr. Joseph D. Duffey
Chairman
National Endowment for
the Humanities
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Mr. Duffey,

I have had the opportunity to study the proposed legislation sent to the Senate and House under a cover letter dated June 20, 1979 signed by you and Mr. Biddle. The Nebraska staff and I have discussed the possible implications of Section 13 which proposes to increase from 25% to 50%, over a five year period, the discretionary portion of funds awarded to state humanities committees. For reasons outlined below, I believe expanding the percentage of discretionary funds is not in the best interest of the humanities in the states.

To begin with, the rationale for the change given in the "Sectional Analysis" assumes a parallelism between state arts and humanities organizations which simply does not exist, as you well know. To argue for the proposed change "...to give the Chairman more flexibility to encourage state appropriations to grant recipients" (p. 7) is, I submit in light of the realities of the reauthorization period, to advance an argument grounded only on a red herring. The reasoning may apply to arts agencies; it does not appear to be relevant to humanities committees. There may be a good reason for changing the discretionary funding formula, but it is not the reason stated. Two other factors in the distribution of discretionary funds are suggested to the Chairman: (i) quality and focus of programs and (ii) state population.

Even if these three factors could be fairly represented--and this is questionable--in decisions on discretionary funds, there are at least five compelling reasons not to increase substantially the discretionary percentage. In the first place, long-range and even relatively short-range planning would be

greatly hampered by the possibility of widely fluctuating appropriations from year to year. Second, establishing universally applicable criteria for "quality and focus" at the national level for allocating half the funds to state programs would necessarily promote unhealthy conformity; national criteria could not be sufficiently sensitive to the subtle yet significant regional and local differences that ought to characterize a state's response to the humanities. Third, state programs necessarily would be forced to expend considerable energy in the competition for discretionary funds thereby siphoning off efforts much more appropriately spent in fostering quality humanities programs in the states. Fourth, there is a minimum appropriation below which an effective state-wide humanities program simply cannot be sustained; a basic administrative structure is essential, and the \$200,000 "floor" in the proposed legislation would allow, according to present formula, almost as much for administration as for program--a manifestly inappropriate situation. Finally, a higher percentage of discretionary funds would undoubtedly have a diverse effect on the states thereby undermining the genuine spirit of cooperation that has done so much to foster the rapid development of state humanities programs over the past nine years.

An important question indeed is whether the three proposed criteria for distributing discretionary funds could ever be applied equitably. Because of the extreme difficulty in making comparative judgments of quality and focus--the present review structure which deals with only a portion of the states at each quarterly Council meeting is only one reason suggesting the virtual impossibility of making such judgments with fairness and consistency--the weight of deciding is most likely to fall on the other factors. Thus, if quality and focus (i) is problematic and level of state appropriation (ii) is functionally irrelevant, population (iii) becomes the main factor. In this scheme, populous states--typically those with the greatest availability of private financial support for the humanities, the largest number of humanistic institutions already functioning and most available to the citizens of those states, and the recipients of the highest percentage of funds from other programs of NEH--would receive the lion's share of appropriations while less populous states with fewer cultural opportunities, not to mention fewer sources of private funds, would experience, over a five year period, a substantial percentage decrease in NEH support for the state program.

It seems apparent that Section 13 of the proposed legislation would not be effective in meeting its stated objective of encouraging state appropriations to humanities committees. It is equally clear that the proposed legislation would likely have an adverse

Mr. Joseph D. Duffey
July 20, 1979
Page 3

effect on the development of public use and appreciation of the humanities in the states. I urge you to consider the full range of implications in the questions I have raised. If you find my concerns valid, I ask that you do all in your power to correct the potential inequities I perceive in the newly proposed formula for the distribution of funds to state humanities committees.

Sincerely,

Bob Bogue
Chairman

BB/sb

cc: Betsy McCreight, Federation of
Public Programs in the Humanities
B. J. Stiles
Gary Messinger