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Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman  
Nomination Hearing (1985)

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## Curran, Edward: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1985): Correspondence 20

Phyllis Franklin

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20 September 1985

The Honorable Orrin G. Hatch  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Hatch:

I am writing to you about the nomination of Edward Curran as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. In response to expressions of concern about this nomination, you have argued that a "generalist"--not a research-oriented scholar--should chair the Endowment. I would like to call your attention to certain assumptions about research scholars that underlie your argument and that deserve careful scrutiny.

You believe that the "analytical approach" of research-oriented professors partially caused the decline in humanities enrollments that occurred in American colleges and universities in the 1970s. This is a serious charge that contradicts the conclusions of those who study trends in American higher education. As you may know, enrollments in college subjects tend to be cyclical. No field shows this more clearly than engineering. Normally, these cycles reflect trends in the larger society as well as events within higher education. The generally accepted interpretation of the decline in humanities enrollments that occurred in the 1970s describes the shift not as a movement of students away from subjects (and they turned away from more than the humanities) but as a movement toward subjects that promised clear and immediate employment opportunities after graduation. The widespread elimination of general education and foreign language requirements in the years preceding this shift in student interest exacerbated the situation. (See Keith M. Baker, "The Report of the Commission on Graduate Education," The University of Chicago Record, vol. 16, no. 2, 3 May 1982, 149.)

If serious research were inimical to student interest and enrollment, one would expect a negative correlation between an English department's commitment to research and its ability to attract and hold undergraduate students in its courses. If there were such a correlation, in fact, the decline in enrollments would have been most severe in the research universities, where most research-oriented scholars teach. Two NEH-funded studies indicate that the opposite is true.

1. In 1980, when the decline in humanities enrollments was still substantial, the research universities enrolled significantly larger percentages of undergraduate students in upper-division English courses than did the comprehensive colleges and universities. (See Frank J. Atelsek and Charles J. Andersen, Undergraduate Student Credit Hours in Science, Engineering, and the Humanities Fall 1980, Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1982, 18.)

2. Similarly, a larger percentage of English departments in the research universities report an increase in the number of majors from 1981 to 1984 than do departments in the comprehensive colleges and universities. (Publication of this MLA study is forthcoming.)

When you claim that research-oriented professors interfere with the natural appeal that the humanities disciplines have had over the ages for the "common man," you overlook the relatively sophisticated level of literacy needed to read and appreciate serious texts. You also suggest that in the past more people benefited from the humanities than now do. In fact, never before in this country have so many men and women had the level of literacy and the access to higher education necessary to study the humanities.

You believe that "educational practices" in the humanities may turn young people away from humanities courses, and you create the impression that research-oriented professors care little about improving or changing teaching. Over the years research-oriented professors in the modern languages have done much to encourage improvements in teaching. I cite only a few individuals from the field of English here: Wayne Booth, a specialist in critical theory at the University of Chicago; J. Hillis Miller, a specialist in nineteenth century literature and critical theory at Yale University; Helen Vendler, a specialist in contemporary poetry at Harvard University; and James V. Mirollo, a specialist in Renaissance literature at Columbia University. Beyond the work of individuals, the MLA, like other associations in the humanities, considers it a constant obligation to assess and reassess the state of teaching and the curriculum in its field. Our Commission on the Future of the Profession in 1981 and 1982 held public hearings throughout the country and galvanized our profession by its calls for improvement. This is just one example of the self-study that is a product of humanities training.

Earlier we expressed concern about the nomination of Edward Curran as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities because we knew little about him and his plans for the Endowment. Your argument on behalf of his appointment has only increased our concern about the commitment of the NEH, under his direction, to scholarship and the values and needs of scholars. In its recently issued report on the reauthorization of the NEH, the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources applauded the Endowment's "continuing support for the bedrock of advanced scholarly research in the humanities on which all other work in the humanities depends." Surely the person who chairs the NEH should understand this research and respect this view.

Sincerely yours,

Phyllis Franklin  
Executive Director

cc: Members of the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources