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Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 30

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Humanities editorial challenged

By Everett C. Albers

The North Dakota Humanities Council can only agree with the last sentence of the Herald editorial of Jan. 25: "The Reagan administration should take a close look at it (the Council's program in North Dakota)."

President Reagan, if he looks closely, will find not the boondoggle suggested by the editorial, but an example of how wisely and carefully a Council of unpaid volunteers can spend federal tax pennies.

The Council expects a "Well done!" from the president for the way it has handled 66 cents per North Dakotan in National Endowment for the Humanities grants each year. If the Herald had looked more carefully at the Council's program, its editorial might have said the same.

Mark Twain offered excellent advice to journalists: "Get your facts first, and then distort 'em as you please."

Here are some of the facts the Herald did not get.

As a result of the Council's 45 awards since July 1, 1980, over 50,000 North Dakotans will participate in humanities programs in 40 different communities.

The audiences for the 334 programs will be like the Chautauqua audiences, which averaged 210 for each of the 40 humanities programs presented in a tent during the summer of 1980. Few have attended college. Most will attend their first humanities program.

Some who come to talk with the 134 historians, philosophers and other teachers and thinkers who have an advanced degree in the humanities, may have seen some of the 21 hours of public television, have heard some of the 13 hours of public radio, or have read some of the 35 historical articles that will have appeared in 50 different newspapers.

They will come to hear professors and others share serious scholarship of the state's cultural heritage and of the humanities in general.

guest column

They will not come to hear humanities professors who have full-time jobs at a state college or other institution talk about public issues in order to "supplement their income." Only five of the 45 projects funded this grant period have had a focus on public policy issues. Only 60 of the scholars with credentials are state employees. They will share \$34,877.10.

The professor who the Herald reported as receiving \$17,000 will earn half of what he could reasonably expect over three grant periods for services performed on his own time.

Fact is, more grant money will go to North Dakota newspapers and the electronic media to make the public aware of the programs and to deliver the humanities to the homes of the state's citizens than will go to professional humanities consultants. During the current grant period, 56 cents, \$182,618.02 of the \$323,792.01 awarded to the state, will go for nonpersonnel costs. Other consultants, including North Dakota Native Americans, journalists and filmmakers, will receive over \$60,000, almost twice as much as those state employees.

Those projects the editorial termed "practical failures," were or promise to be good humanities projects. "Energy and the Way We Live" ran out of private money, but an average of 15 attended the 26 programs and many thousands listened to the nine radio programs.

The ambitious 20-part video history of North Dakota does not need to be completed until June, 1982. It was not funded to be broadcast, but to be the focus of scores of public programs in libraries, at retirement homes, and for clubs and associa-

tions throughout the state.

The Council believes that, as former Council member William Sherman of Grand Forks often said, "The Humanities programs give a lot of bang for the buck."

The state's citizens are matching every 66 cents in federal taxes with 28 cents in cash and 63 cents in other donations. The Council is funding projects in the best conservative tradition of the humanities: Preserving something of value, at an administrative cost of less than 15 percent.

The Council, which represents the people of the state, believes that President Reagan will agree that support of the humanities is essential to American democracy.

Which does indeed raise "deeply troubling philosophical questions."

Is 66 cents per North Dakotan enough public support of the humanities, upon which democracy depends? Is it reasonable to continue to ask the humanities scholar, who spends as long preparing for service to society as does a physician, lawyer or other professional, to share that scholarship for so little?

The writer is executive director of the North Dakota Humanities Council.