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State Humanities Committees (1979-1982): Correspondence 24

William F. Wyatt Jr.

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August 14, 1979

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

Dear Mr. Duffey:

Thank you very much for your letter of July 16 expressing your appreciation for my service on the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities. I have enjoyed my association with the Rhode Island Committee more than any other I have had in recent times. The Committee is composed of marvelous people and our task is an exciting and challenging one. I feel that the Committee is now stronger and more diverse than it has been at any time in the past, and feel, too, that the federal legislation which mandated two-year terms was most wise. The first appointments by the Governor of the State were disappointing: one never appeared at all, and the other, after two most helpful appearances, was never seen again. The present two seem more likely to take an interest in the Committee's work, and I was particularly impressed by the contributions of Lt. Gov. Thomas DiLuglio at his first meeting.

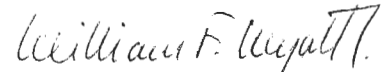
I gather that Senator Pell is again trying to introduce changes in the nature of the state-based committees. I am opposed to this. Senator Pell is, however, far too intelligent a man and too astute a political observer not to have his reasons. Whatever those reasons may be, I feel confident that they do not apply to us here in Rhode Island where the staff and committee both are intensely interested in distribution -- both geographical and intellectual -- of the projects we fund. There may indeed be problems in other states, but I would respectfully suggest that they cannot be solved by injecting the political process into humanistic enterprises. I hope that the Pell amendment will be defeated, and that the state-based program may continue to function with private citizens who, though responsible and sensitive to political concerns, are not governed by those concerns. It is most interesting to me that all those on the Committee with political experience -- Judge Florence Murray, Senator Frank Sgambato, Lt. Gov. Thomas DiLuglio -- are unanimous in opposing the Pell amendment.

I see other threats to the successful operation of the Rhode Island Committee, and I take this opportunity to pass them on to you for your consideration. Though we are not a government department or agency, we are responsible to the public. This is a heavy responsibility, and we take it seriously. Particularly so in budgetary matters. I have noticed over the years what I consider to be a fiscal conservatism and itemization of categories which alarms me. That is, instead of having a fixed sum to allocate as we choose, we now have categories of awards, each with its own total, which limit the range of choice of our projects. This was not imposed by NEH, but came about as a result of the desire to insure that funds could be distributed in an equitable manner to the various constituencies we serve. I think it is a bad idea. The Humanities do not readily lend themselves to compartmentalization, and it would be a terrible thing if we were to be unable to fund a worthy project because funds, though unexpended, were earmarked for some other purpose. As I say, this compartmentalization was voted by the Committee: I feel, though, that it was influenced at least in part by the need, perceived by many, that outright government takeover was imminent if we could not clearly describe the purposes and amounts awarded to the various categories. Together with compartmentalization and fiscal responsibility has come -- and for the same reasons -- a stress on the finished product. It was this emphasis which produced the book award program, a serious mistake it seems to me. I fear that we have become too much interested in tangible results at the expense of exciting process. I hope that you will argue that the Humanities are in fact a process and not a product.

Evaluation is another major concern. Professor Neusner has written forcefully about the absence of evaluation in various programs within the Endowment, and he is quite correct. But there is the danger that evaluation might one day become still another straightjacket within which the Committee has to operate. I feel that evaluation should be carried out in terms only of the goals of both the state program and the applicant. Within these limits evaluation should be rigorous, and those who do not perform well should be denied future consideration. My fear, however, is that evaluation might very well serve to exclude certain projects which might be extremely worthwhile, either because they are of an untraditional nature or because the applicant has non-traditional credentials. Much as I should like to hold that the Humanities equals a Classical education, I cannot, and I cannot easily state in the abstract what a good humanities proposal is or should be. I feel that one of the most important aspects of the state-based programs is precisely their ability to operate in innovative ways. One does not need a Ph.D. or a massive bibliography to qualify. So, though I agree that evaluation is absolutely necessary, I think it might be well for someone high up in the Endowment to discuss the question of what evaluation is and what service it is intended to perform.

All my concerns have a common thread. I am very much afraid that the State Based Program of NEH may become still another instrument of preserving the status quo, and might end up by merely parceling out federal funds to well-established people. If the program does this, it will have failed of its purpose, which I take to be the sharing of humanistic inquiry, not knowledge, with the American public.

Sincerely yours,



William F. Wyatt, Sr.
Professor of Classics

NFWJR/e

cc: ✓ Senator Claiborne Pell
Mr. Albert Klyberg
Mr. Thomas Roberts