

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506



OFFICE OF THE CHAIRMAN

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September 25, 2000

Dear Colleague,

I am writing to invite your consideration of a policy matter affecting a number of programs here at the National Endowment for the Humanities. The matter concerns NEH's support for long-term humanities projects such as the production of scholarly editions of important historical and cultural documents and the creation of dictionaries, encyclopedias, databases, and other major reference materials in the humanities. The Endowment's ability to support such projects—and all other equally meritorious humanities projects for which NEH funding is sought—has been constrained by the budget cuts sustained by the agency in fiscal year 1996. In the years since the budget cuts, NEH has been exploring a variety of means of relieving the funding pressures without sacrificing its ability to continue its support for a broad array of exemplary projects.

Over the past several years, the Endowment's staff has engaged in a series of conversations about this issue with the National Council on the Humanities, the agency's Presidentially appointed advisory board. The latest round of this discussion has led to the preparation of the enclosed paper, which documents the nature and extent of NEH support for long-term projects and outlines a number of issues and policy considerations that have surfaced during the course of the policy review.

Given your potential interest in this matter, we would welcome your comments on the issues and options discussed in the paper. Comments should be submitted to the Endowment's Office of Strategic Planning (OSP) by October 16. The address for OSP is listed on the last page of the paper.

Thank you for your continuing interest in the Endowment's work. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John Roberts".

John Roberts  
Deputy Chairman

Enclosure

cc: William Ferris

## **Support for Long-Term Projects at the National Endowment for the Humanities**

### INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this paper are to review NEH's policies and practices concerning the funding of long-term projects in the humanities; to examine the financial and programmatic consequences of current practices in support of these projects; to present a range of policy options that would enable NEH to continue to support long-term projects while also providing adequate funding for other meritorious humanities projects; and to invite public comment on the issues and options put forward in the paper.

The definition of "long-term project" is necessarily arbitrary, both in the length of time deemed "long" and in the types of support encompassed under the general definition of "project." For the purposes of this policy review, NEH defines "long-term projects" as those that (1) focus on a single subject or product (or set of related products); (2) are overseen by a permanent staff at a single institution; and (3) are expected to take more than ten years to complete. By defining long-term projects in this way, NEH is seeking to focus attention on those projects whose claims on the agency's funding are both serial and extensive.

This policy review is part of the Endowment's continuing efforts to assess its programs and procedures in light of the funding pressures the agency has faced since its budget was reduced by nearly forty percent in fiscal year (FY) 1996. To cope with a reduction of that magnitude, the Endowment was forced to downsize and reorganize most of its programs and operations. As a result of this budget cut and the subsequent years of essentially level budgets, the number of grants NEH has been able to award annually has diminished significantly (down from 1,871 grants in FY 1995 to 874 in FY 1999); in addition, many of the projects the agency is able to fund can only be supported at reduced levels. For programs that had previously supported a substantial number of long-term projects, the effects of the cuts have been even more dramatic, as many such projects have continued to apply to the Endowment for awards.

The Endowment recently surveyed all of its grant programs to identify those funding categories that are currently supporting long-term projects in the humanities and, within those categories, the nature, extent, and budgetary consequences of providing such support. The survey identified two relevant NEH funding areas: the Collaborative Research program in the Division of Research Programs, which has supported a relatively large number of ongoing editing projects and other scholarly efforts such as archaeological research; and the Reference Materials funding category in the Division of Preservation and Access, which supports a relatively small number of long-term reference tools and materials projects. These funding areas are discussed in detail below. Because NEH's presidentially appointed advisory board, the National Council on the Humanities, has asked the agency to consider the parallel issue of repeat awards to directors of seminars and institutes in the humanities through the Division of Education

Programs, a discussion of this issue is also included in this paper. Finally, the paper also includes a brief review of the NEH Challenge Grants program's role in supporting long-term projects. While this program does not provide serial grant support for individual projects, long-term projects that have been supported elsewhere in the agency can and do apply for challenge grants to establish permanent endowments and for other purposes.

### NEH SUPPORT FOR LONG-TERM HUMANITIES PROJECTS

#### *(1) Collaborative Research Projects in the Division of Research Programs*

- a) Background. For more than thirty years NEH has been providing grant support for humanities projects that may continue for many years, even decades. A majority of such projects are currently supported in the Endowment's Division of Research Programs through its Collaborative Research program. And, within the Collaborative program, a preponderance of such grants are awarded to projects that are producing such works of scholarship as editions of the papers of various U.S. presidents, authoritative editions of the writings and papers of important national and international historical and cultural figures, and collections that document eras and events of enduring significance for the humanities. Most of these editing projects are by their nature labor-intensive undertakings, involving the painstaking assembly, organization, annotation, transcription, and, in some cases, translation of original source materials. And many of these materials are in precarious condition, are in handwriting that is difficult to decipher, and are held in archives and libraries scattered across the country or around the globe. Scholars associated with these projects also compose important introductory material for the editions and, since few historical documents are entirely self-explanatory, provide annotations that help to illuminate obscure events and individuals referenced in the documents. The results of this work usually appear serially over a period of years as printed volumes, reels of microfilm, or, increasingly, in digital formats.

Scholarly editing projects that have received major grants from NEH include the collected papers of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, Mark Twain, Thomas A. Edison, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Charles Darwin; the documentary history of the ratification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights; the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition; the correspondence of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning; and an edition of reassembled fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls. (Among these examples of long-term projects, NEH support has ranged from ten years to nearly three decades.) The Endowment's support helps make these and other original source materials more widely available to scholars, students, and general readers.

In the annual competition for grants in the Collaborative Research program, applications from long-term projects are regarded as "new" proposals in the sense that they are neither privileged nor handicapped in the review process. Endowment staff and outside evaluators review these projects closely to ensure that acceptable levels of quality and productivity are being maintained. Projects that do not bear this scrutiny,

or that are judged by panelists and reviewers to be of lesser significance than other proposals under consideration in the same review cycle, are not recommended for further funding.

Over the years NEH has made a significant investment of public funds in scholarly editing. The Endowment typically provides these projects with a mix of "outright funds" (direct support for project costs) and "matching funds" (an offer of funds that are only released after the grantee raises a like amount from third-party sources). Since 1980, more than 250 editing projects have received approximately \$57 million in outright funds and another \$22 million in federal matching funds from NEH. (Note: These figures include all editing projects, not just those that are long-term.) Institutions that sponsor these collaborative research projects, such as major research universities, also make important financial contributions by supporting such items as full or partial salaries of staff, travel expenses, technical assistance, and indirect costs. Indeed, while NEH's Collaborative Research program's guidelines specify that the federal contribution to a project will not exceed 80 percent of total projects costs, in practice the Endowment's share of expenses typically amounts to about 40 percent or less. To date, nearly one hundred of the 250 NEH-supported projects have been completed.

In addition to NEH, many long-term projects also have access to and receive grants from other federal and nonfederal sources such as the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Packard Humanities Institute, and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) at the National Archives. NHPRC, in fact, provides a measure of support to many of the same editing projects the Endowment funds. NHPRC grants, however, are limited solely to projects dealing with subjects in American history. In FY 2000, NHPRC awarded approximately \$3.8 million in grants to 42 documentary editing projects.

- b) Support for Long-Term Projects in the Aftermath of the Budget Cuts. Prior to the deep budget cuts suffered by NEH in FY 1996, support for long-term editing projects accounted for about one-third of the Research division's support for collaborative research. In the wake of the cuts, support for long-term projects in the Research division now accounts for approximately 70 percent (or \$3.6 million) of the Collaborative Research program's annual budget. Consequently, the amount of funding available to the program for projects of all types—long-term as well as short-term—has been reduced.

The Research division has employed a variety of strategies to meet the financial challenges resulting from the budget reduction. When projects are approved for funding, for example, offers are tendered that reflect the Endowment's best estimate of how much funding is required to maintain the projects at current staffing levels; funding offers usually reflect past funding levels more faithfully than current requests. Based on past performance, staff also makes a judgment about the ability of projects to attract third-party support, which can help to determine the proposed funding mix. Program staff frequently challenge long-term projects to be aggressive

in seeking private-sector funding, though it is recognized that there is a trade-off: As editors turn into full-time fund-raisers, project productivity declines.

Since the FY 1996 reductions, the Endowment has explored a number of other policy and programmatic options in an attempt to address the funding situation in the Collaborative Research program. From FY 1998 through FY 2000, for example, NEH annually requested a significant increase in funding from Congress to implement a new special initiative, American Legacy Editions (ALE), which would have helped to place approximately 50-60 long-term American historical and cultural editing projects on firmer financial footing, thus reducing their future reliance on NEH funding. (Note: The ALE proposal was limited to documentary editing projects on American subjects.) The initiative proposed to double the amount of funding the agency was devoting to these projects and to set up innovative financial arrangements to extend the impact of NEH money—such as, for example, making more extensive use of offers of matching funds, building in incentives for technological innovation and swifter progress in producing grant products, and providing flexible financial arrangements such as depleting endowments. Congress did not appropriate the increased funding needed to implement the initiative, however, and the Endowment has since abandoned this approach.

A number of other funding alternatives have since been discussed within the agency and by members of the Research Committee of the National Council on the Humanities, NEH's presidentially appointed advisory board. Most recently, the National Council considered and gave preliminary approval to a new policy suggested by the Research division—and applying only to projects funded by the Collaborative Research program of that division—that would restrict NEH support for long-term projects to matching funds once an initial period of outright funding had expired. Under this policy, projects that have been supported for six or more years would be eligible for matching funds awarded on a dollar-for-dollar basis, with the matching requirement doubling to two-to-one at the twelve-year mark. By eliminating long-term projects' access to NEH's outright funds (i.e., direct funds carrying no matching requirement), those funds would be "freed up" to help support other worthy research projects. While this proposed policy met with the general approval of the National Council, several members urged the Endowment to postpone its implementation until the ramifications—for Collaborative Research projects, for the Endowment as a whole, and for others in the humanities community who might be most affected by the policy change—could be more fully considered.

At the same time this policy change has been under consideration, NEH has also experimented with another approach to evaluating long-term projects: using a single review panel to review all such applications rather than distributing them among several panels where they would compete against a broad array of projects. This approach was first tried in the FY 2000 Collaborative Research competition, and in that competition seven of the fourteen projects reviewed by the single panel were approved for funding. These projects were among 38 grants the program awarded in FY 2000, with the remaining 31 having been reviewed by the agency's traditional

discipline-based panels. The Endowment is considering continuing this experiment again in the FY 2001 Collaborative program competition.

- c) **Current and Projected Support for Long-Term Projects.** The Collaborative Research program currently supports 47 long-term projects, most of which are scholarly editions. These projects' annual cost to the Research division is approximately \$3.6 million. While projections into the future are always hazardous, an estimated \$75 million in funding would be needed over a period of years to bring all of the currently supported long-term editions projects to completion. And while as many as twenty long-term projects may be completed by 2010, a number of others likely will continue well into the middle of the twenty-first century, and yet others are just now entering the pipeline. Thus, the funding pressures on the program will not be entirely relieved through attrition.

(2) *Reference Materials Projects in the Division of Preservation and Access*

The Endowment's Division of Preservation and Access supports projects in eight funding categories, of which only one – Reference Materials – provides grants for projects that meet the definition of long-term. This program category currently funds 15 long-term reference tools and materials projects.

The long-term projects supported in the Reference Materials category include dictionaries, encyclopedias, historical or linguistic atlases, databases, textbases, bibliographies, and other research tools and reference works that serve the research needs of scholars, students, and general readers. Like the long-term documentary editing projects described previously in this paper, many reference materials projects are relatively expensive undertakings, involve teams of scholars and researchers, and may require many years to complete. Examples of currently funded long-term reference materials include the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, which is documenting geographical differences in the vocabulary, pronunciation, and structure of American English; the *Sumerian Dictionary*, a comprehensive dictionary of the oldest known language to be preserved in written form; the *English Short Title Catalog*, a database of 10,000 bibliographic records for books published in English from 1641 through 1700; the *Aramaic Lexicon*, a dictionary of an ancient Near Eastern language used during the time of Christ; *l'Année philologique*, a comprehensive and authoritative bibliography of research in all fields of classical studies; and the *History of Cartography*, which provides the cultural and historical context for the making of maps throughout the world from the earliest times to the present.

Over the past five years, \$6.5 million in outright funds and \$1.4 million in federal matching funds have been awarded to the 15 long-term reference materials projects, representing approximately nine percent of the Preservation and Access division's budget for those years. (Nine of the 15 projects receive a combination of outright and federal matching funds.) Another \$1.4 million in federal matching funds were offered in FY 1999 and FY 2000, but have not yet been awarded to the projects pending receipt of

third-party contributions. Seven of the 15 projects are expected to conclude their work within the next ten years.

As in the Research division, the budget cuts from FY 1996 have forced a significant reduction in support for all of the Preservation and Access division's funding categories, including the Reference Materials category. The division has approached this financial challenge by employing a combination of strategies. For reference materials, these include: encouragement of a project's staff (and its host institution) to seek new sources of support (or where relevant, an endowment or completion fund that would reduce the project's dependence on NEH); awards that combine outright and federal matching funds; reduced awards that are still capable of maintaining a project's current level of productivity; and grant periods of two years rather than three (except when three would complete a project). Discussions with project directors have yielded some promising results; one university, for example, has recently hired a development specialist to raise funds for a long-term reference work housed on campus. In addition, three of the fifteen current long-term reference works have received recent NEH Challenge Grants and another three are developing plans to raise endowments and intend to apply for NEH Challenge Grants.

### *(3) Seminars and Institutes in the Division of Education Programs*

- a) Background. Although the Division of Education Programs does not award any grants that fit the definition of long-term projects, the division has been asked to consider the parallel issue of repeat awards to directors in the Summer Seminars and Summer Institutes program. The purpose of this section of the report, then, is to delineate the characteristics of Seminars and Institutes grants that distinguish them from long-term projects in other divisions and to provide information on the number of project directors in recent competitions that have received awards previously in the same category on the same topic.

NEH Seminars and Institutes provide college and school teachers with opportunities to study significant topics and fundamental texts in the humanities, thereby revitalizing their understanding of history, literature, world languages, and other humanities subjects. Under the direction of a distinguished scholar or team of scholars, these residential summer projects provide the teachers assembled from throughout the country with access to important humanities scholarship and to effective ways of conveying and advancing it upon their return to the classroom.

Through its Seminars and Institutes program, the Endowment seeks to support projects of intellectual quality and significance, irrespective of whether a director has led a seminar or institute previously or is offering it for the first time. On occasions when former directors apply again to lead another seminar or institute, NEH guidelines specify that such directors must document claims of prior success by submitting participant evaluations and by including evidence of growth and fine-tuning in the project since its most recent offering. This said, the guidelines are careful to point out that proposals to repeat previously offered projects will not be

given preferential treatment in the review process; in fact, NEH has adopted a general policy that, all other things being equal, new applicants will be favored over repeat directors.

- b) Recent Award Patterns. The Education division has conducted an analysis of applications, awards, and directors in the four seminar and institute categories for the last two years to determine if any recent directors had been awarded previous grants on the same topic in the same category (dating back to 1989). The findings of that analysis are as follows:

**Repeat Directors as a Percentage of all Directors in Each Category, 1999-2000**

Summer Institutes for College Teachers

2000: 0% (0 of 7 awards)

1999: 0% (0 of 9 awards)

Summer Seminars for College Teachers

2000: 27% (4 of 15 awards)

1999: 50% (7 of 14 awards)

Summer Institutes for School Teachers

2000: 23% (3 of 13 awards)

1999: 56% (5 of 9 awards)

Summer Seminars for School Teachers

2000: 71% (10 of 14 awards)

1999: 80% (16 of 20 awards)

- c) Context. In considering the data on repeat directors in the Seminars and Institutes program, readers should bear in mind the recent history of this program, particularly the Seminars category. In the period from 1984 to 1994 (that is, before the budget cuts), the number of NEH Summer Seminars for College Teachers offered each year ranged between 50 and 60; in the summer of 2000, however, only 15 were offered. Similarly, prior to the budget cuts, the typical number of Summer Seminars for School Teachers offered was 60 to 70; in the summer of 2000, the number had declined to only 14. When there was ample funding for the program, the directors with the most enthusiastic participant evaluations and the largest numbers of applicants were encouraged to reapply. This practice stopped with the budget cuts of FY 1996, and in the time since the concern with filling a large slate of offerings has been replaced with the concern of rejecting all but the very strongest proposals in stiff competitions.

Readers should similarly be aware of the severity of the budget cuts as they affected the Institutes category. The number of Summer Institutes for College and University Teachers awarded annually, typically between 20 and 25 before the budget cuts, totaled only seven projects in the summer of 2000. Likewise, the number of Summer Institutes for School Teachers offered varied between 20 and 30 in the early 1990s but had dropped to only nine in the summer of 1999 and 13 in the summer of 2000.

#### (4) *NEH Challenge Grants*

The NEH Office of Challenge Grants does not provide long-term support for projects. However, long-term projects that have been supported elsewhere in the agency can and do apply for challenge grants. A Challenge Grant for a reference materials project or documentary editing project, for example, will typically enable the host institution to establish an endowment to help the project build a stronger base of financial support and relieve the projects of the necessity of seeking continued funding through other NEH grant programs. Over the last five years, an estimated \$1.4 million or three percent of Challenge program funds have been awarded in support of such projects.

### POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The foregoing review of the Endowment's support of long-term projects raises a number of policy questions for the agency's and the humanities community's consideration:

1. Should the Endowment limit long-term projects to NEH matching funds, thus requiring projects to seek higher levels of third-party support?
2. Within each NEH division where long-term projects are funded, should the panel review system be structured in such a way that applications from these projects compete against one another for further funding?
3. In grant-making divisions that support long-term projects, should the Endowment establish discrete programs with their own funding allocations for such projects?
4. Should NEH limit its support for long-term projects to a specified number of years, number of grants, or amount of cumulative funding?
5. Should the Endowment limit support for long-term projects to the NEH Challenge Grants program after such projects have received grants in other programs for a specific number of years, been awarded a specific number of grants, or reached a certain level of total NEH funding?
6. Should the Endowment maintain the status quo by continuing to support long-term projects the way it currently does?

In putting forward these options—which NEH understands to be neither exhaustive nor definitive—the Endowment's intention is to offer a menu of possible strategies that could

be pursued. The humanities community is invited to respond to the suggestions offered and to propose additional ones as appropriate. In doing so, readers of this paper are encouraged to give particular consideration to issues related to the implementation of any policies that might later be adopted: What is the likely impact on current, long-term grantees of any new policy limiting support for their projects? To what extent should a new policy be applied equally to all funding programs? Should a new policy be adopted immediately or phased-in over a period of time?

#### SOLICITATION OF PUBLIC COMMENT

The Endowment invites public review of and comment on the issues and suggested policy options discussed in this paper. Following the Endowment's review of any comments subsequently received, NEH will develop specific policy recommendations for the consideration of the National Council on the Humanities. A discussion of these recommendations will occur during the open (that is, public) session of an upcoming Council meeting.

All comments should be submitted in writing to the NEH Office of Strategic Planning (which is coordinating this review) no later than Monday, October 16, 2000. Letters should be addressed to:

Office of Strategic Planning  
National Endowment for the Humanities  
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Room 403  
Washington, DC 20506

E-mail responses are also welcome. Please direct such submissions to [osp@neh.gov](mailto:osp@neh.gov).

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