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2 October 1985

Testimony for the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources

by Theodore J. Ziolkowski, President, Modern Language Association of America

For over a century the Modern Language Association of America has worked to promote education, advanced study, and research in the modern languages and their literatures and to further the common interests of students and teachers of these subjects.

The MLA has 26,000 members. Most of them are college and university professors; some are independent scholars, businesspeople interested in language and literature; some are elementary and secondary school teachers.

Since 1884 the association has published PMLA, a journal that carries articles of interest to those who study and teach languages and literature. It is one of the leading journals of scholarship and criticism in this country.

Since 1922 we have published annually a comprehensive bibliography of scholarship on languages, literature, and folklore. Since 1956, this bibliography has been international in scope. Since 1976 it has been available online and is the largest humanities database in the world.

In addition, we publish approximately twenty books a year, a majority of which aim at improving college teaching. We are also known as the publisher of the MLA Handbook, which is used by college students throughout the country as a guide in the writing of research papers.

We work closely with organizations representing the teaching of languages and literature in the elementary and secondary schools. For example, in the 1950s, the MLA led the national effort to strengthen and improve the quality

of foreign language instruction at all levels. Similarly, in 1958 and 1961, we participated in two projects that shaped the teaching of English in this country at all levels during the post-Sputnik era: the Basic Issues Conference was funded by the Ford Foundation; Project English was supported by the United States Office of Education. Right now we are working with representatives of English associations on the design of a conference to be held in the summer of 1987. At this conference an equal number of representatives from the elementary, secondary, and college levels will consider the way English should be taught in light of the current needs of American students and in terms of current developments in humanities research.

These jointly organized conferences of teachers and scholars stand, we think, as models of the kind of bond that should exist between scholarship in the humanities and teaching at all levels. After a century of experience we know that without the solid foundation that careful scholarship provides, we build on sand. We were pleased to note that the members of this committee, in recommending reauthorization, applauded the NEH's "continuing support for the bedrock of advanced scholarly research in the humanities on which all other work in the humanities depends." We are convinced that weakening the bond between scholarship and education would drastically weaken the Endowment's effectiveness.

During the summer we testified with other members of the American Council of Learned Societies that the NEH "has been crucial to the excellence of American work on language and literature during the past twenty years" (210). And we were gratified to learn that members of this Committee also judged that the Endowments "are operating very much as the Congress had envisioned

when the authorizing legislation was first passed. In fact, the leveraging force of Endowment grants on the improvement of cultural life in America has far exceeded original expectations." (2)

We think that leadership has played a key role in the success of the National Endowment for the Humanities. From the start people with training and experience in the humanities have provided this leadership, just as people with training and experience in the sciences have led the National Science Foundation. We think that this tradition should be continued. When we talk about people with training and experience in the humanities, we do not mean that the person who chairs the NEH must have a PhD or indeed any other advanced academic degree, but we do have in mind people whose intellectual interests at some point in their careers drew them to scholarly speculation and the desire to share the results of that speculation with others, or people drawn to think and write about some of the issues that concern humanists, about the definitions and purposes of a humanities education, for example. We seek someone who has earned the respect of the humanities community and who can speak to the American people on behalf of the humanities. We seek someone who can provide the broadest kind of intellectual leadership.