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# Reauthorization: Hearings and Reports (1990): Correspondence 13

Andrew P. Debicki

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# The University of Kansas

Joyce and Elizabeth Hall Center for the Humanities

April 23, 1990

The Honorable Claiborne Pell  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities  
United States Senate  
Washington, D. C. 20510-6300

Dear Senator Pell:

I wanted to thank you, above all, for having me testify at your subcommittee's hearing on the National Endowment for the Humanities, and for your interest and attention. I have long admired your contributions in the Senate, and it was a very special pleasure and privilege to speak before you. I am glad to know that my comments were helpful, and answer below the two questions of your letter of April 9.

1. In commenting on the lack of incentives for studying languages, I was referring to lack of societal recognition, to a general indifference on the part of the public, and to a lack of obvious rewards for students and teachers. Even those students who succeed very well in their pursuit of language competence have little reason to expect that their parents or peer group will take note of their achievements, that future employers will pay a premium for their language competence, or even that their school or college will reward them in a tangible way.

The NEH cannot expect to influence this deeply rooted societal indifference quickly or directly, but it can have a long-term positive effect in several ways. It can require or urge applicants who propose new education projects to build student incentives into their proposals (for example, short study trips abroad for students who achieve the highest level of proficiency in the program; competitive examinations that reward student achievers in a way comparable to the reward system for athletes; high-visibility use of the best students' language competencies in the school or college community). It can also develop programs which would encourage multi-year language sequences in the schools, eliminating the lack of continuity so common to language learning by our students. That would make it possible for college students to not only achieve language proficiency but also study in some depth the culture and literature of another nation. I am convinced that under Mrs. Cheney's leadership the NEH will be very aware of these issues and possibilities. (The comments on language teaching in her "Fifty Hours; A Core Curriculum for College Students" are excellent, and especially perceptive on ways of integrating languages in a humanities curriculum.)

2. You ask whether I think that the controversy over restrictive language is having any kind of "chilling effect" in the humanities community. I know that it has. At the December 1989 MLA annual convention in Washington, MLA members expressed their concern about the intent of the existing restrictive amendment and its likely negative effects on the kinds of subjects scholars could propose to the NEH for support, especially in the fellowship program. After the convention the MLA's executive director, Phyllis Franklin, continued to receive letters and telephone inquiries, and the MLA's governing board voted to support reauthorization of the endowments without restrictive language.

I enclose for your information a column about this issue written by Catharine R. Stimpson, who is President of the MLA. The column will appear in the spring issue of the association Newsletter.

Please let me know if the MLA or I can be of further assistance. With very best wishes.

Sincerely,



Andrew P. Debicki  
Director