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# Reauthorization: Hearings and Reports (1990): Correspondence 06

Theodore Ziolkowski

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Theodore Ziolkowski, *Dean*  
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May 7, 1990

Senator Claiborne Pell, Chairman  
Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities  
Committee on Labor and Human Resources  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510-6300

Dear Senator Pell:

Permit me again to express my appreciation for the opportunity to appear before your Subcommittee and to testify on behalf of the reauthorization of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Endowment is an institution of major importance to the humanities community nationally, and many of us who have worked with, and benefited from, the NEH over the years feel a keen sense of obligation and commitment to that agency. We are especially grateful for the support that you have demonstrated so dramatically on many occasions since 1965.

In your letter you request elaboration on three points to which my testimony alluded.

1. The "serious mischief" that I had in mind as a possible result of the new NEH procedures for subgrants is the implied invitation to subgranting agencies to reallocate their funds "creatively"--that is, to fund potentially questionable projects from other sources and to fund from NEH grants nothing but politically "safe" projects--projects that are sure to win the ethical seal of approval from those in the Congress who take an interest in such matters. The same sort of fundamentally deceptive tactic would of course be possible whenever a site visit from the NEH was announced: only "acceptable" projects would be discussed on that day.

The result, as I put it in my oral testimony, would be to encourage shrewd accounting practices in the subgranting agencies rather than true accountability. In the process, the NEH could well lose the opportunity to sponsor certain major projects of scholarship simply because the subgranting agencies, in their effort to second-guess the prevailing political agenda, would not bring them to the attention of the Endowment.

2. I sense very definitely a "chilling effect" that could carry over from the controversy in the NEA into the humanities community. The example I mentioned in my oral testimony was a

distinguished work on Greek Homosexuality by K. J. Dover (Harvard University Press, 1979). This book contains photographs of homoerotic scenes from Greek vases that are at least as explicit as the photographs by Mapplethorpe that stirred up such controversy. Yet the book represents one of the major contributions to classical scholarship of the past decade.

The humanities community is not exempt from the sort of potential censorship that has threatened the arts community. Indeed, some of the most innovative and challenging humanities scholarship in recent years has focused precisely on topics that were long felt to be untouchable because of the prevailing norms. It would be a true cultural regression if American scholars should feel that they must back away from certain topics of research simply because they are not regarded as proper and suitable by critics in the government. Scholarly quality, as judged by peer review, should be the principal criterion. Scholars should be just as free as creative artists to pursue their topics wherever they lead. This is particularly the case with younger scholars, who find relatively few sources of support for their work but who are often the future leaders of their fields precisely because they are adventuresome. I am as impatient as anyone with some of the mindless excesses of recent scholarship (and art). But truly great works of scholarship and art cannot emerge and thrive in an atmosphere that is threatening or stifling or chilling as a result of any suggestion that certain topics are "off limits." That would be a radical infringement of the academic freedom for which Western society has struggled for the past two centuries.

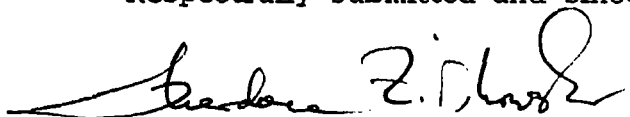
3. The independent national institutions that compose the infrastructure of scholarship include independent research libraries, centers for advanced study, and a few other institutions that facilitate scholarly work. While each has a distinctive history and raison d'être, they have relatively similar regular operations. All of them, that is, foster scholarship through development and maintenance of collections of scholarly materials, and/or facilitate scholarship by providing financial, coordinational, and other support to scholars for individual and collaborative activities.

A handful of these institutions have endowments or other income sufficient to maintain these regular activities. In several instances, endowments created in the last century were adequate for many years but have been ravaged by the inflation of recent decades. As I stated in my testimony, many seek to supplement inadequate income for their regular activities through projects supported by foundations or the government. The catch-22 is that the projects usually entail new activities and can at best only partially support the regular operations.

These financial difficulties must almost always have a negative impact on scholarship sustained by the institutions. Some independent research libraries have been forced to reduce staff, sell parts of their collections, narrow the areas in which collections are developed, and make similar reductions in resources available for scholars. For institutions with facilities to maintain, the consequences are sometimes severe, as perhaps best illustrated by the New York Historical Society, in which paintings and other cultural artifacts were damaged through inadequate storage, an outcome of pinched finances and deferred maintenance. Ultimately these institutions are forced to reduce direct support to individual scholars, most commonly by providing fewer or smaller fellowships.

I hope that these clarifications will be useful to you and your staff as you complete the hearing record. Above all, I hope that my testimony will support your continuing effort to reauthorize an endowment that has contributed so importantly to the cultural and intellectual life of the nation--and to reauthorize it in a manner sufficiently liberal and sufficiently generous to encourage the freest possible life of the mind in the United States.

Respectfully submitted and sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Theodore Ziolkowski".

Theodore Ziolkowski  
Dean of the Graduate School  
Class of 1900 Professor of Modern Languages  
Past President of the Modern Language Association of America