

**AN ONGOING EXPERIMENT:**

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**STATE COUNCILS,  
THE HUMANITIES,  
AND THE  
AMERICAN PUBLIC**



**ELIZABETH LYNN**  
WITH FOREWORD BY PETER LEVINE

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## FOREWORD

By Peter Levine

**E**LIZABETH LYNN'S PAPER ON THE HISTORY of the state humanities councils uncovers an essential story. It is important not only for people interested in the councils, but also for anyone concerned about the deeply troubled condition of the humanities and public life in America today.

As Lynn notes, the National Endowment for the Humanities was launched at a special time. In 1965, the federal government was rapidly expanding its role in many areas, buoyed by widespread public trust. Three-quarters of Americans then said they generally trusted the government, a number that had fallen to thirty percent by 2010.<sup>1</sup> In the mid-1960s, for better or for worse, most Americans accepted the logic that if something was important, the federal government should fund it.

People also deferred relatively obligingly to expertise and professionalism. Few then would balk at the idea that scholars could decide who in their own guild should get the public money. The 1960s were the heyday of a style of government that the political scientist Theodore Lowi named "interest group liberalism." Governments delegated their decision-making authority to specialized groups, so that not only did scientists allocate the funds of the National Science Foundation, and artists choose the grantees of the National Endowment for the Arts, but the Department of Agriculture delegated its regulatory authority to a Cotton Board, a National Potato Promotion Board, and an Egg Board.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, members of Congress engaged in widespread logrolling: voting for one another's programs without supporting them in principle. Urban liberals would vote for the Farm Bill, and rural conservatives would help fund the National Endowment for the Arts, with no one sincerely endorsing the whole package.<sup>3</sup> Delegation and logrolling were two hallmarks of interest-group liberalism. Both were alternatives to the idea that the public or its elected representatives must deliberate about how to allocate public resources.

Finally, this was a time when the humanities themselves were confident and relatively uncontroversial. The American academy had absorbed the distinguished scholars trained in the Germanic tradition, who had been exiled by Hitler. Those continental exiles mingled with writers of the kind of literary nonfiction and criticism that had traditionally predominated in the English-speaking world. Critical theory and post-modernism were still off on the horizon. Humanists tended to celebrate the American constitutional order, and their topics were palatable to a broad audience of taxpayers—mostly great books by dead Europeans and Americans rather than controversial

cultural theory. In short, humanities professors not only benefited from the general trust for experts and professionals, but their disciplines still enjoyed an honored place in the culture.

Given these conditions—public support for federal spending, a widespread pattern of delegating governmental decisions to experts, and the high prestige of scholarship in the humanities—it was good politics to invest federal dollars in “the best” humanities scholarship, mostly conducted in the nation’s flagship institutions. That was the founding model of the NEH.

But the situation quickly changed. Trust in the government and other institutions collapsed, and the humanities classroom became a rhetorical battleground. Under duress and at the height of the Vietnam-era campus turmoil (just after the Vice President of the United States had decried the country’s “effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals”<sup>4</sup>), the NEH decided to create state-based programs on a pilot basis. These programs would be more populist, diverse, participatory, and pluralist than the national grants program itself. They might bridge the emerging gap between beltway bureaucrats and tenured professors, on one hand, and regular citizens, on the other.

It turned out that the state humanities councils were dynamic, drawing together an impressive and energetic cadre of active citizens who cared about the humanities. The NEH’s national leaders soon came to realize that their most energetic supporters were in the state councils, and they have turned to these supporters repeatedly to save the funding for the Endowment itself. Lynn insightfully follows the story up to the present moment, showing that the NEH and the state councils have adapted to changes in politics and culture with successive new justifications of the humanities in a democracy.

Today, shrinking enrollments and subsidies for higher education lend the humanities an air of crisis. Early in 2013, the governor of North Carolina announced a plan to reduce public support for college majors that did not lead to jobs. He announced this policy on the radio program of former NEH chairman Bill Bennett, who holds a PhD in philosophy. According to Kevin Kiley of *Inside Higher Ed*, “The Republican governor also called into question the value of publicly supporting liberal arts majors after [Bennett] made a joke about gender studies courses at UNC-Chapel Hill. ‘If you want to take gender studies that’s fine, go to a private school and take it . . . . But I don’t want to subsidize that if that’s not going to get someone a job.’”<sup>5</sup> Gender studies encompasses social science research, but the other departments that would suffer the most from cuts would likely be in the humanities.

Although this moment is particularly difficult, the debate about the public value of the humanities is a perennial one. The word “humanist” derives from the informal name for a new kind of tutor who emerged during the Renaissance. Medieval universities had offered a curriculum that strongly emphasized abstract, theoretical, and technical subjects—above all, philosophy and theology. The main purpose was to prepare senior churchmen. Young men interested in secular, public roles—as courtiers in monarchies or office-holders in republics—sought a different kind of education

that was more practical, concrete, and likely to make them persuasive in public. They attended universities and paid private “humanists” to tutor them on the side, or else they simply studied with humanists, whose curricula began to influence the grammar schools and then the universities of Europe.

The original purpose of the humanities, in short, was to prepare young men to be effective public speakers and to have secular public virtues. The mainstay of humanistic education was the study of narrative, both historical and fictional. Philosophy was also studied, but the focus shifted from abstract arguments to characters like Socrates and the literary form of works by authors like Plato, Seneca, Erasmus, and Montaigne.

Shakespeare had a humanistic education in his grammar school, and he nicely summarizes its goals at the beginning of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Young Lucentio hopes to “deck his fortune with his virtuous deeds”—and to accomplish that, he needs an education. He sets off for the great medieval university of Padua, where he plans to “plunge . . . in the deep” by studying philosophy. The form of philosophy that he would encounter at Padua would be scholasticism, the impressively developed and refined offshoot of Aristotle’s thought. He is rather like a young person today who wants to study economics: a difficult, highly technical discipline that promises professional career opportunities and that pretends to explain important general questions. His servant (and perhaps tutor), Tranio, suggests that he should mix that diet with some literature and rhetoric:

Mi perdonato, gentle master mine,  
I am in all affected as yourself;  
Glad that you thus continue your resolve  
To suck the sweets of sweet philosophy.  
Only, good master, while we do admire  
This virtue and this moral discipline,  
Let’s be no stoics nor no stocks, I pray;  
Or so devote to Aristotle’s cheques  
As Ovid be an outcast quite abjured:  
Balk logic with acquaintance that you have  
And practise rhetoric in your common talk . . . (I.i)

Although the humanities originated as preparation for public life and “common talk,” in the century after Shakespeare humanistic scholars became increasingly sophisticated about the texts they taught and the historical contexts in which those texts originated. The original idea was to inspire young men with the examples of heroes from the classical past. But the more that humanistic scholars understood classical civilization, the more remote, complex, and varied it appeared. They pursued the truth with the most sophisticated available research tools, treating their impact on students as secondary. The Battle of the Books that broke out in England around 1700 appeared to be a humorous debate between the “wits” and the “pedants,” but in part it was a conflict between amateur enthusiasts of classical texts and professional classicists.



Insofar as the amateur enthusiasts—the “wits”—made a serious case for their side, they argued that the humanities should support public life. The pedants retorted that the amateurs did not really understand the texts they alone appreciated.<sup>6</sup>

This debate has never been resolved, and perhaps never will be, because there is enduring merit in two conflicting ideals: accessible, participatory *public* humanities, and the standards of professional scholarship. But as long as we expect the public to fund the humanities with their taxes, it will be essential to make a persuasive case to voters. That case must somehow honor both rigor and relevance, both scholarly excellence and some kind of “common talk.” Lynn shows that, in America at least, state councils have been uniquely charged (or burdened) with managing this tension on behalf of the humanities as a whole. As we debate the role of the humanities in the 21st century, the council movement that began in the 20th needs to be much better understood. This essay offers an essential introduction, and invites us to ask what the next half-century should look like.

## ENDNOTES

1. American National Election Studies data, analyzed by the author.
2. Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States*, second edition (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 86.
3. Ibid, p. 55.
4. Spiro T. Agnew, speech in New Orleans, Oct. 19, 1969, quoted in William Safire, *Safire’s Political Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 208.
5. Kevin Kiley, “Another Liberal Arts Critic,” *Inside Higher Ed*, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/30/north-carolina-governor-joins-chorus-republicans-critical-liberal-arts#ixzz2Jl8egAsK>.
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## INTRODUCTION

*National events determine our ideals, as much as  
our ideals determine national events.*

—Jane Addams

**1965** WAS A SIGNATURE YEAR in American legislative history.

Between April and November, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Higher Education Act, Water and Air Quality Acts, and Social Security Amendments that created Medicaid and Medicare. Tucked in among these landmark Great Society programs was the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, which established the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Six years later, with much less signatory flourish, the novice National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) started an experiment of its own. Under pressure from Congress, though inwardly unsure about the merits of the enterprise, NEH launched a test group of six “state-based programs” to explore how best to bring the humanities to the American public.

Their uncertain experiment is still with us today in the form of a public humanities movement, a set of supporting institutions, and a continuing question about the role of the humanities in American public life. There are now 56 state humanities councils, one in every state and territory. These councils receive more than one-third of all NEH program funds (over \$40 million in FY2011) and they raise almost as many dollars in state and private funds. Each year they conduct many thousands of programs nationwide, providing what former NEH Chairman Jim Leach has called the “finest outreach education in the humanities in the world today.”<sup>1</sup> And yet, at their core, these councils are still exploratory organizations. They are still asking—and seeking to answer in new ways from year to year—what the humanities can do to enhance American public life.

There are lessons to be drawn from this ongoing experiment in bringing the humanities to the public, both for those who worry about the health of the humanities and for those who seek to strengthen American public life. This paper draws on the author’s research into the state council movement to suggest what might be learned from it.



## ORIGINS OF THE STATE HUMANITIES COUNCIL MOVEMENT

**I**N TRACING THEIR ORIGINS, state humanities councils routinely look back to the early 1960s, to the era of Kennedy’s “New Frontier” and Johnson’s “Great Society,” and to the 1965 legislation that established the National Endowment for the Humanities. Yet if we revisit that seminal moment we find that the key players were focused almost entirely on the academic humanities. State humanities councils were not even a glint in the NEH founders’ eyes, much less part of their original plan.

The animating purpose of NEH was to secure recognition and a share of federal funding for America’s “academic humanists”—scholars of various humanities disciplines (history, literature, languages, philosophy) who had professionalized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and who increasingly saw themselves as members of a guild rather than as members of an educational institution, state, or community. In the trenchant words of Ellen Lagemann and Harry Lewis:

As their affiliations shifted from educational institutions to academic guilds, faculty members identified themselves more with national professional communities than with the local residential communities in which their institutions were located. With this cosmopolitanism came a related shift in professional identity: professors’ disciplinary affiliations trumped their status as teachers.

The result, note Lagemann and Lewis, was that “research, publication, and national reputation became more important to professors’ advancement than their skill and devotion as educators.”<sup>2</sup>

But even as academic humanists increasingly defined themselves through their research, they were being overshadowed by colleagues in the sciences. Federal funding for the sciences had grown rapidly in the years after World War II, first through research support, particularly from the military, and then through the establishment of the National Science Foundation in 1950. In the words of Barnaby Keeney, who would chair the first national commission on the humanities, and later, the NEH itself, “The results created an imbalance in the universities and colleges—despite the evident benefits for education in general. Federal funds were relatively abundant for the sciences, but they were entirely lacking for the humanities and the arts.”<sup>3</sup>

### Balancing The Scales

In 1963, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, and the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa Society organized a National Commission on the Humanities, hoping to address this imbalance in funding and to



promote the value of work done by academic humanists. The Commission brought together university professors and presidents, business and professional leaders, and school administrators to study the state of the humanities and make recommendations to Congress.

A year later, the Commission published its report, recommending, as expected, that the President and Congress establish a National Humanities Foundation. As Robert Conner has observed, the report offered three key arguments in favor of allocating federal funds to support the arts and humanities. First, these funds would begin to correct the imbalance with science by supporting research in the humanities. Second, they would help America secure its international cultural status on the world stage by supporting the arts, and thus help win the Cold War against the USSR. And third, they would strengthen democracy itself by creating better citizens.<sup>4</sup>

In putting forward this last argument, the writers of the report made several claims, which were later redacted into the following declaration in the 1965 legislation—a declaration that has served as a veritable proof text for NEH and the state councils ever since:

Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and the humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.<sup>5</sup>

This brief but by now iconic statement introduced two key arguments for the value of the public humanities. One argument might be called the principle of access—the doctrine that all citizens, regardless of background and “wherever located,” deserve access to the humanities. The principle of access underlies a broader tradition of education for democracy, manifest in the land grant movement of the nineteenth century and the educational broadcasting movement of the twentieth. The same principle of access has also animated the work of many state humanities councils, and continues to define the purpose of that work for many council leaders today.

A second key argument embedded in the proof text is what we might call the democracy needs argument. This argument asserts a direct link between the humanities and good citizenship in the form of a syllogism: Democracy needs citizens who have X. The humanities cultivate X. Therefore, democracy needs the humanities. This syllogism would appear time and again in the following decades to justify the value of the humanities for American democracy, with X redefined in light of the particular concerns of each era. Thus, to jump ahead to the 1980s: Democracy needs citizens who appreciate difference. The humanities cultivate appreciation of difference. Therefore democracy needs the humanities. Or, in the early years of this century, after the attacks of 9/11: Democracy needs citizens who appreciate American history and values. The humanities cultivate appreciation of American history and values. Therefore, democracy needs the humanities. In our own moment, X is clearly civility and civic engagement. Democracy needs citizens who are civil and civically engaged. The humanities cultivate civility and civic engagement. Therefore democracy needs the humanities.

In the 1964 report, however, X is defined as “wisdom and vision” and further elaborated as the kind of wisdom and vision that makes us “masters of technology rather than its unthinking servants.” These brief, pungent phrases signal a concern amplified elsewhere in the report; namely, that technology is creating a society of people with free time but not

free minds—people who cannot think for themselves and who are therefore not true individuals, autonomous and free.

According to the authors of the 1964 report, the humanities offer just the cure for this disease, because they cultivate individuals who can think for themselves against the increasing drone and distraction of a mechanized world. The humanities comprise an “attitude toward life,” suggests the report, and this attitude “centers on concern for the human individual: for his emotional development, for his moral, religious and aesthetic ideas, and for his goals—including in particular his growth as a rational human being and as a responsible member of society.” The humanities and also the arts are essential to helping the individual reach “his fullest potential [and] make his fullest contribution.” And finally: “The arts and humanities, and the study of them, are therefore where we look most directly for enrichment of the individual’s experience and his capacity for responding to it.”<sup>6</sup>

Without individual enrichment, our increased opportunity for leisure will lead us directly to the dark side, the report announces with rhetorical flourish. “When men and women find nothing within themselves, they turn to trivial and narcotic amusements, and the society of which they are a part becomes socially delinquent and potentially unstable. The humanities are the immemorial answer to man’s questioning and to his need for self-expression; they are uniquely equipped to fill ‘the abyss of leisure.’”<sup>7</sup>

The Humanities Commission Report was widely circulated and well received, and its recommendations were soon realized. In 1965, as we have noted, President Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, giving birth to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. Remarkably, this piece of legislation enjoyed the most cosponsors of any in that first session of the 89th Congress.

Congressional discussion sounded themes similar to those found in the 1964 Commission Report. Consider, for example, the following statement in the House debate from Congressman Frank Thompson, D-NJ:

The ultimate end is to develop the capacity of all our citizens for the full enjoyment of their lives intellectually, aesthetically, and to the moral opportunities [sic]; all the rest is means. . . . If we have no intellectual, aesthetic, or moral opportunities as we move into automation, we will be, indeed, a sick society and much of the sickness called delinquency is due to the fact many people lack that purpose which comes from values deeper than power.<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to the efforts of Frank Thompson, Claiborne Pell, John Brademas, and others in Congress, the National Endowment for the Humanities was established that year, equipped with a mission to cultivate democracy and vision in all citizens, but animated by a particular interest in supporting and forwarding the work of academic humanists. The new endowment accordingly structured its activities into three divisions: research, education, and public programs, with the latter designed to support existing national and regional cultural institutions, such as libraries and museums. The idea of the state humanities council had not yet been born.



## RISE OF THE STATE-BASED PROGRAMS

**T**HE IDEA OF STATE-BASED HUMANITIES PROGRAMS emerged only five years after the signing of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, and under instructive circumstances. The year was 1970. NEH was up for reauthorization, and it was being pressed by congressional supporters to do something that would help the American people understand the need for continued funding. “The humanities” then, as now, were a hard sell at home. The National Endowment for the Arts had state agencies to support the arts, and these agencies were making their own case effectively—in some cases even raiding NEH coffers for additional funds to support their work. Unlike artists, however, humanists were increasingly tucked away on college and university campuses. The situation presented difficulties for congressional representatives who had to defend humanities expenditures to their own constituents. If no one knew what the humanities were, how could they be explained?

NEH responded to the pressure by suggesting a regional approach to fostering greater public appreciation, an approach that would utilize the network of major organizations (libraries, museums, colleges, historical societies) already receiving support through its Division of Public Programs. Congressional advocates disagreed; they argued that a state-level approach would be more effective in creating the kind of grassroots support that would help them make their case on Capitol Hill.

Under duress from Congress and the arts world alike, NEH agreed to experiment with “state-based programs” in the humanities in six states, starting in 1971. Thus began a self-conscious experiment—both organizationally and programmatically—with the humanities in American public life.

### The Volunteer Committees

Starting out, the Division of Public Programs at NEH decided to experiment with three different organizational models, each tested out in two states.

1. In Maine and Oklahoma, it authorized state arts agencies to do humanities programming.
2. In Georgia and Missouri, it created humanities programs within university extension services or divisions of continuing education.
3. In Wyoming and Oregon, it created a new freestanding organization, in the form of a volunteer committee. The committee could include representation from existing agencies with an interest in particular forms of the humanities (historical societies, libraries, colleges, or archives, for example) and could also include citizens from different domains (public members, as they came to be

known), but they were all expected to share an interest in bringing the humanities to the public.

Within a year, the results of this part of the public humanities experiment were in—and they were definitive. In a kind of Goldilocks moment, NEH found that the arts agencies did not focus enough attention on the humanities, and the continuing education agencies did not engage a wider public. But the volunteer committees were just right. In the words of one chronicler, “The NEH had discovered that volunteer state committees were the most effective bodies for delivering humanities programs to the public audiences which the Endowment wished to reach.”<sup>9</sup>

In fact, these new groups of scholars and citizens were unexpectedly energetic and passionate. As one state committee member put it, Washington D.C. realized that it now had “a tiger by the tail.” In the words of another observer, “The program is releasing energies in the humanities in local contexts more effectively than would happen in a program centralized in Washington D.C.”<sup>10</sup>

What exactly was the nature of this “energy”? This, it seems to me, is worth exploring. Here, as a preliminary attempt, I would note three features.

First, the committees brought together people who were not usually in conversation with one another, crossing boundaries that seemed, by the 1970s, to divide disciplines, institutions, and—most notably—academic professionals and the lay public. Thus, to offer one example, the Indiana volunteer committee formed in late 1971 began with the dean of Indiana’s only “evening college,” another educational administrator, an historian, a librarian, and a philanthropist. These five Hoosiers were invited to Washington D.C., where, for the most part, they met one another for the first time. As the historian in the group, Bob Burns of Notre Dame, later recalled, “There was a professor from Evanston coming, a professor from Bloomington coming, and then . . . a librarian from Terre Haute and a public citizen. Well, I mean, this was like nothing I had ever heard of before . . . this was off the wall.”<sup>11</sup>

Second, the volunteers shared a common devotion to their mission, which was to connect the humanities to the public, and a unifying sense of being explorers on a new frontier. In a 1993 interview, the philanthropist or “public citizen” in the group, Virginia Ball, explained that the mission created a powerful, cohesive force across the group’s many differences. “It was a strong committee,” she observed. “I think it was strong because it was so diverse. And [yet] we all worked together, everyone was pulling together. It was a very cohesive group . . . very cohesive toward our projects or our real philosophy of getting the academics, the humanities, into the public.” Ball, a veteran of many other civic groups and organizations, mused, “it was an interesting experience—probably the most interesting, really, I’ve ever done.”<sup>12</sup>

Third, as the mission itself ensured, the people who joined these committees (or at least the people who stayed) were “both/and” people. They were deeply interested both in ideas and in their larger communities. In the words of NEH staffer Todd Phillips, these were people who had a “dual capacity for abstract thought and pragmatic activity”—and not just a capacity, but a passion, for both.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, one significant accomplishment of the state council movement may turn out to have been the creation of these committees (now boards), as a unique network of scholars and public citizens with a shared passion for ideas and an attachment to their own communities and states.

## The Great Public Policy Experiment

The volunteer committees were organizational experiments. But they were also, at heart, social experiments. Through these programs, the NEH sought to “reintroduce” the academic humanities to the American public—creating a meaningful relationship where one no longer existed. As NEH chairman Ronald Berman somberly remarked in his 1973 address at the first national meeting of the state committees, “The state-based program . . . bears the burden of reintroducing the humanities into American life at the most immediate level—at the level of the individual adult citizen.”<sup>14</sup> Looking back on that time, in 1993 Indiana committee member Virginia Ball remembered well the sense of “burden.” “We were charged to bring the ivory tower of academia down to the public. . . . And, as I say, neither of them really cared whether the other one existed!”<sup>15</sup>

In order to help the academy and the public learn to care for one another, the Division of Public Programs initially added a third element to the programmatic mix: public policy. The state-based programs were charged with focusing on public policy issues of interest to the out-of-school public, organized around state themes and illuminated by the expertise of humanities scholars. By targeting out-of-school adults, the programs would not intrude upon the other research and education agendas of NEH. By focusing on public policy, they would hopefully solicit broad participation and add some “moral urgency” to the mix.<sup>16</sup> By including humanities scholars, they would demonstrate the relevance of the humanities to the lives of ordinary Americans. And by adopting state themes, their activities would have greater focus and unity.

The new state-based programs put public policy into their organizations’ titles (as in the Maine Council for the Humanities and Public Policy, or Vermont Committee on the Humanities and Public Issues) and went to work trying to figure out how to operationalize the program mission. Not surprisingly, different states interpreted and implemented the mission in different ways. Indiana, for instance, defined public policy as matters on which the public could vote, and put humanists into dialogue with members of the public on these issues. California, on the other hand, focused more intensely on the theoretical interplay between the humanities and public policy, developing discussions among humanists and policy specialists, and chose not to worry too much about public engagement.

The overall effect of the public policy framework, however, was to redefine the humanities as a kind of policy expertise, embodied in the person of the humanities scholar. Throughout the 1970s, as a result of these programs, academic humanists were sent forth into a variety of settings, from hospitals to town halls, to share their expertise. They sat on panels alongside government officials and policy analysts, offering historical perspective on wastewater management or a philosophical critique of the concepts of justice underlying urban development policies. They led discussions of literature with municipal planners, as in the case of the “Circuit Riders” program

in the state of Maine. They moved into medical schools as philosophers in residence, joining staff meetings as members of the healthcare team.

The experimentation was energetic—but the results were decidedly mixed, both from the perspective of the public and from the perspective of the academy. Bob Burns described some of the challenges for the public in his 1993 interview:

The public policy part of it wasn't too hard to grab hold of because all the poverty issues, and women's issues were getting forward. And people were getting very serious about them at that time. . . . But how you got the humanities issues tied in with that . . . was extremely difficult. And extremely difficult to explain to people in the local communities who were trying to write the proposals. They understood the public policy part. But, you know, "how do you get the humanities in the discussion? Give me some examples of humanities insights." OK, then there's a painful silence.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the academic humanists were struggling as well. In his 1979 paper on "The Humanities and the Civic Self," the ethicist William May observed that the public policy mandate had effectively eliminated some scholars from programs "and tempted still others to bend their subjects in grotesque ways." The humanities are "essentially social," argued May, "not contingently social—as if they acquire a social significance only when they take up a contemporary public theme."<sup>18</sup>

## **A Tiger in the Tank**

In 1976, as part of its Congressional reauthorization, NEH lifted the public policy mandate and the state theme requirement as well, allowing state councils to interpret their mission of "bringing the humanities to the public" in a much broader range of ways. The Great Public Policy Experiment was over. But the volunteer committees were a singular success. Committees were now active in all 50 states—an energized new network of scholars and citizens drawn from a wide range of occupations and perspectives. "Nearly one thousand individuals now serve on the state committees," wrote the NEH National Council. "They include business and labor leaders, farmers, university presidents, members of minorities, judges, housewives, retired people, scholars, public librarians and many others."<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, NEH now understood that this tiger they had somehow caught by the tail was in truth the tiger in their tank—fueling their ability to hang on to public funding. When, in 1976, congressional advocates pressed to refashion the volunteer committees into government-affiliated state agencies, NEH politely but firmly demurred.

At the same time, NEH was understandably concerned about controlling the tiger. Following reauthorization and the removal of the public policy mandate, the Endowment's National Council circulated a set of comments, carefully framed as suggestions rather than directives, encouraging councils to remain focused on their mission:

The public interest will not be wisely served by the creation of "mini-Endowments" in each state—programs which fully duplicate



all of the functions and programs of the Endowment—because of the obvious danger of redundancy, inefficiency and waste of limited resources.

Committees, they warned, should not engage in scholarly activity, as that requires “national competition and review . . . Work in the humanities done by scholars for the primary use of other scholars lends itself to national, rather than local, review and support, since such activities almost always serve a scholarly community that transcends local boundaries.” Nor should they engage in “curricular support,” as that was already being funded by state and local government. Instead, declared the Council, they should “consider any and all programmatic means to increase what the law terms ‘public understanding and appreciation of the humanities.’”<sup>20</sup>

The final line of this directive is telling. Having attempted to cordon off the professional research and education functions of the humanities from the work of these public-minded organizations, the National Council could do little more than simply refer the councils to the law and repeat their given mission: “to consider any and all programmatic means to increase what the law terms ‘public understanding and appreciation of the humanities.’” From the perspective of NEH, it was clear what councils should not be doing—but not clear, perhaps, what councils were supposed to do.



## THE MISSION

*The sole interest of a council is in the humanities and the general public. . . . No other agency makes that claim.*

Donald Gibson, Director  
NEH Division of Public Programs, 1982

**V**OLUNTEER COMMITTEES HAD PASSION, and they had funding, and they had a unique mission—to bring the humanities to the American public. At the same time, precisely because it was so unique, the mission was open to interpretation. The result, from 1971 forward, was a passionate, well-funded, sincere, and continually evolving attempt to work out, on the ground, just what the humanities can and should be to the American public. We have already seen how one early interpretation of that mission—the Great Public Policy Experiment—played out. What follows is a quick sketch of the various ways the mission has been interpreted across the years, categorized (no doubt too neatly) by decade. In brief, these interpretations of mission reflect shifting ideas, not only about what the humanities essentially are but also about what a democratic citizenry needs, along with evolving programming formats that seek—with varying success—to meet those needs.

### 1950s-60s: Cultivating the Individual

- Humanities as wisdom, embodied in classic texts and questions of Western culture
- Classic Format: study group
- Goal: autonomous individuals

*Exemplary statement:*

“The humanities . . . as an underlying attitude toward life . . . center[s] on concern for the human individual: for his emotional development, for his moral, religious and aesthetic ideas, and for his goals—including in particular his growth as a rational human being and as a responsible member of society.”—Report of the Commission on the Humanities, 1964.<sup>21</sup>

### 1970s: The Great Public Policy Experiment

- Humanities as expertise, embodied in scholars’ testimony on public policy issues
- Classic Format: panel presentation
- Goal: informed voters

*Exemplary statement:*

The humanities . . . provide an historical and philosophical context for the choices which we must make as a society. . . . And it is for this reason that we make grants

to support the work of the state-based committees.”—National Endowment for the Humanities, 1973.<sup>22</sup>

### **1980s: Multiculturalism**

- Humanities as difference, embodied in interrogation of self and encounter with others
- Classic Format: the symposium
- Goal: prepared pluralist

*Exemplary statement:*

“Humanistic learning is implicated in the essential question of what it means to be human. It explores how people over time and in different cultures have answered that question in different ways and through different forms of expression so that finally we may confront the same essential questions in our daily life, in our own time and place.”—Report to Congress on the State of the Humanities, 1985.<sup>23</sup>

### **1990s: Public Culture**

- Humanities as insight, embodied in public scholarship and civic discourse
- Classic Format: national conversation
- Goal: thoughtful Americans

*Exemplary statement:*

“The improvement of American cultural conversation is the most important task of the humanities community in the last decade of this century.”—National Task Force on Scholarship and the Public Humanities, 1989.<sup>24</sup>

### **2000s: Civic Engagement**

- Humanities as connection, embodied in practices of reflection and dialogue
- Classic Format: community conversation
- Goal: engaged citizens

*Exemplary statement:*

“The Maryland Humanities Council brings communities together, promoting conversations about important issues. We encourage Marylanders with different backgrounds and viewpoints to see, hear and learn more about others and themselves. We believe that only informed, engaged citizens can build healthy, democratic societies.”—  
Maryland Humanities Council Mission Statement, 2012.<sup>25</sup>



## CONCLUSION

**WHAT DOES THIS BRIEF FORAY** into the rich history of the state humanities council movement suggest about the capacity of these organizations to help strengthen American public life? I leave that question open for discussion, but want to conclude by emphasizing three relevant lessons we might take from their “ongoing experiment.”

First, by establishing the National Endowment for the Humanities, Congress was drawn to notice the growing gap between the professional aspirations of academic humanists and the interests of the American public. The state humanities councils were created to bridge this gap by “bringing the humanities to the American public.”

Second, through the volunteer committees, councils created new networks of active citizens who were diverse in background and beliefs, yet commonly interested in ideas and in their own communities. The emergence and vitality of these networks point to some deeper possibilities for the role of the humanities in our democracy than the role carved out by a professionalized class of scholars. For example, they suggest that the humanities can be used to strengthen connections to our community and our fellow citizens, to spur commitment to broadly civic forms of action on behalf of that community, and to build comfort and skill in coping with diverse perspectives and values in civic life. In short, the humanities should be part of larger efforts afoot today to build civic capacity.

Third, through the evolving interpretation of their mission, the councils continuously reflect the predicaments of citizenship in our democracy. Decade after decade, they have identified and sought to address key challenges at the heart of public life as these rose into view—challenges directly related to the preparation of citizens for life in a democracy: challenges of cultivating autonomous individuals, informed voters, prepared pluralists, thoughtful conversationalists, and engaged community members.

These challenges do not disappear, of course. Instead they accumulate, adding to our complex and sometimes overwhelming sense of what is required of citizens in a democracy.

Arriving finally in our own moment, what challenge awaits? And how will councils now answer the question of the relationship between the humanities and democracy?

Will they echo the interest in individual cultivation so forcefully expressed during the 1950s and early 1960s—that the humanities develop true individuals, free men and women who can think rationally and act responsibly in a society prone to entertainment and distraction?

Will they revive the great public policy experiment of the 1970s, arguing that the humanities are a form of expert knowledge, embodied in scholars who should be brought into decision-making settings to educate and inform citizen action?

Will they emphasize the discovery of sameness and difference, facilitated by the humanities, as especially important in a pluralistic society?

Will they pursue the hope of a better public culture, embodied in a national conversation led by scholars on enduring human questions—questions not so much about how we should vote as about how we should live?

Will they continue the trend of the past decade toward more local conversations, embedded in community, intent on civic engagement, in which the humanities are represented not by scholars so much as by practices, processes, resources, and goals?

Or will they address a new challenge, perhaps related to the increasing inequality in our society, or to the digital and global conditions in which we live today?

What kinds of citizens does democracy need now? And how will the humanities play their part?

## ENDNOTES

1. Jim Leach, "Re-Imagining the American Dream: the Humanities and Citizenship" (National Humanities Conference, St. Petersburg, FL, November 5, 2011).
2. Ellen Lagemann and Harry Lewis, *What is College For? The Public Purpose of Higher Education*, 17. Also see Harry Boyte, *Going Public: Academics and Public Life*.
3. Barnaby Keeney and Judith Culligan, "The National Endowment for the Humanities" (*Encyclopedia of Education* at Encyclopedia.com, 2002).
4. W. Robert Connor, "Testimony of the GY-1994 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities before the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies," May 12, 1993.
5. National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities Act, Sec. 2, 1965. In the witty words of Esther Mackintosh, president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, this statement "contains language so powerful in its description of the value of the humanities that by now those of us who work in this field have to suppress an impulse to stand and put our hands over our hearts when we recite it." Mackintosh, "Untitled remarks for the New England Forum on the Humanities and Civil Society" (Boston: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2012), 1.
6. Report of the Commission on the Humanities (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1964), 1, 3.
7. Report of the Commission on the Humanities, 5.
8. Quoted in Connor, 1993.
9. *The State Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities: A Brief History* (Unpublished Manuscript, Author Unknown, 1994), 6.
10. *The State Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities*, 7, footnote 12.
11. Robert Burns, Transcribed Interview with Elizabeth Racette (Indiana University Oral History Research Center, 1993), 8.
12. Virginia Ball, Transcribed Interview with Elizabeth Racette (Indiana University Oral History Research Center, 1993), 16, 14, 9. Alan Shusterman, who served as the Indiana council's second director, described the board in much the same way. "And the group always was fairly cohesive. I mean . . . we all felt we were doing something important."
13. Todd Phillips, "Section D: Summary Overview of the Sample States, and Conclusion" from unpublished history of state humanities councils (date unknown).
14. Ronald Berman, "The Endowment's Public Programs," in *Proceedings: National Meeting of State-Based Committees* (National Endowment for the Humanities, 1973), 4.



15. Virginia Ball, 5.
16. John Barcroft, director of the Division of Public Programs for NEH in the early 1970s and lead architect of the State-Based Program, as it was then called, put the point with characteristic bluntness in his concluding remarks at the first national meeting of state committees, held in Washington, D.C. in May, 1973. "The focus on genuine public policy issues is crucial. . . . It is what gives the program its moral urgency, and without it, the program is in danger of becoming an interesting anomaly and no more." *Proceedings: National Meeting of State-Based Committees* (National Endowment for the Humanities, 1973), 77.
17. Robert Burns, 13.
18. William May, *The Humanities and the Civic Self*, 10.
19. National Council on the Humanities, "Comments: The Endowment's Reauthorizing Legislation and the Programs of State Committees for the Humanities" (1977), 1.
20. National Council on the Humanities, "Comments," 2.
21. American Council of Learned Societies, et al. *Report of the Commission on the Humanities*, 1.
22. Ronald Berman, "The Endowment's Public Programs," in National Endowment for the Humanities, *Proceedings: National Meeting of State-Based Committees*, 4.
23. American Council of Learned Societies, 1985, *Report to the Congress of the United States on the State of the Humanities*, xv. The Federation of Public Programs in the Humanities (today the Federation of State Humanities Councils) also sounded this theme in its 1980 national meeting with a workshop on cultural pluralism, deftly defining the decade to come.
24. James Quay and James Veninga, 18.
25. Maryland Humanities Council.

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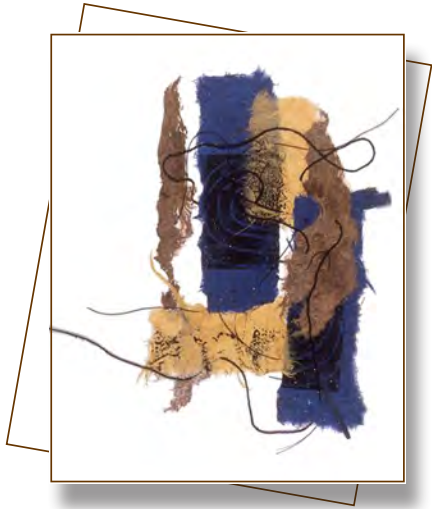
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"Attachments" by Dorothy Schwartz









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