

WHERE I THINK WE ARE RIGHT NOW

The upcoming meeting of the Federation Board of Directors promises to be a crucial one. It would have been that way even if we hadn't received Steve's letter of resignation in mid-July. With Steve's departure, and now with Geri's leaving too, we have a network of personnel decisions to make, and we must take all appropriate steps to insure that this transitional period is undergirded with as much stability as we are able to discover and sustain. These are tall orders.

In preparation for our discussions and deliberations, I have found myself reflecting deeply on the strengths and weaknesses of our organization -- our successes and failures, our accomplishments and those potential objectives that still lie beyond our grasp. I do not expect everyone on the Board to agree with my assessments, but I am jotting them down, for whatever purposes, as background for the way in which I will choose to move when we meet together.

It has become clear to me within the past couple of years that the Federation is obligated to do its work within a context that is riddled with cross-purposes. The plain fact is that some of the tension with the Endowment is built into our relationship. Anyone who has followed the career of William Bennett, for example, would have been able to predict, with complete accuracy, that there would be tension between him and key personnel in the state councils during his tenure as NEH Chairman. We experienced it. Some have charged us with encouraging it, though our dominant posture was to try to modulate it. But it should not have surprised us when it occurred.

Similarly, during the years of the Reagan presidency, we have found

ourselves, at times, in opposition to the disposition the Endowment has officially wished to take relative to the Congress and to Congressional appropriations. As we all know, the White House has been urging stringent fiscal responsibility among the federal agencies. Official Endowment policy has been to go before Congress with modest budgetary proposals, and then to argue that such streamlined budgets will still provide adequate funding for the excellent projects that deserve to be supported. We, for our part, representing a network of fifty-three state councils -- whose organizational structure is markedly different from those of typical applicants to other divisions within the Endowment -- cannot accept the premise upon which official Endowment policy is based. And, because of the 20 percent component in the official legislation (which comes as close to making the work of the state councils an "entitlement program" as anything within the legislation), we will find ourselves operating at cross-purposes with official or stated Endowment wishes. But, given the nature of the situation, it should not surprise us when these tensions surface.

So too, when the funding support is threatened, we are challenged by the state councils to restore what is lost, or, alternatively, to work diligently for increases. If we are successful at this, we are praised by the state councils. If we are not successful, we become vulnerable to their threats to withdraw support. They praise us, of course, for the support services we provide. But when the crunch comes, it is our ability to effect budgetary success that scores most significantly with our constituents. The resolutions that are brought forward at the annual meeting tend to focus on the need to achieve greater success with our funding source in Washington. All of us know that this trans-

lates into maintaining adequate congressional protections against real or imagined budget cuts, and particularly against those that are recommended by the Endowment's administration. Indeed, the Federation

has chosen to adapt at this that it currently functions as one of the main sources of such information for the entire humanities community. Our troubles are compounded by the fact we have no real business. By contrast, whatever else the various state councils are, they are obligated to serve as regrant agencies through which federal monies are awarded to local institutions and groups in support of projects within the states. Similarly, whatever else the Endowment is, it is obligated to dispense monies in support of worthy projects within the humanities, as defined within the authorizing legislation. So too, whatever else the Division of State Programs is, it is obligated, by law, to assist the work of the state councils, and this involves the dispensing of monies. The Federation, by contrast, asks for money instead of being able to award it. And even when it is successful -- as it has been on numerous occasions -- in raising or preserving the federal budgetary allocation, it benefits from its efforts, if at all, only indirectly. This, of course, is the role of a service organization. It functions as broker, coordinator, mediator, and facilitator, but has very little of its own to sell, and receives its primary income from the largess of those it wishes to serve. Service organizations, by their very nature, are second-order institutions. They would not exist were there no prior primary work to which they are always tangentially related. Through the years the Federation has tried to make itself indispensable to the state councils on the basis of the quality of methodological and intellectually-substantive goods

steps we take. From within the Endowment I have also heard criticism

it has been able to provide. The information it has transmitted has kept the councils effectively abreast of crucial developments within their more comprehensive working environments. Indeed, the Federation has become so adept at this that it currently functions as one of the key sources of such information for the entire humanities community. And yet, it is work that is meant to be supportive of other work. Were the other work not there, the Federation would have no real work of its own.

One learns something of the nature of an organization by keeping close watch over the criticisms that come its way, for criticisms say something specific about the expectations that are built into the support of an organization. In my time in office I have heard the same criticisms over and over. From the states I have heard criticisms that the work of the Federation requires dues that constitute a significant portion of a council's budget, and it is not always clear that the outlay is worth it. Again, this is a criticism that is built into the nature of the situation. It is thoroughly predictable, and even when the Federation is operating at full capacity and efficiency. From Endowment personnel, and others, I have heard a consistent criticism that the Federation sponsors an annual national conference which, to too large an extent, is utilized to abuse certain Endowment administrators and to criticize existing Endowment policies. It makes no difference, it seems, to argue that the sponsorship of a national conference does not carry responsibility for all of the incidents that take place there. The criticism continues to surface no matter what precautionary steps we take. From within the Endowment I have also heard criticism

that the lobbying activities of the Federation have acquired a disproportionate role, and that the Federation must give greater attention to other activities and responsibilities if it is going to come of age as an effective national professional organization. While there may be some basis for the latter portion of this criticism, it is significant that is characteristically juxtaposed against lobbying (which I take to be the real force of the charge); and this is built into the nature of the relationship between the Endowment and the Federation. What must also be said is that the Federation is obligated to engage in lobbying activities -- and in the good will gestures in which all of us have been involved -- in order to protect state programs in the humanities from the Endowment itself.

It is in light of all of this that I find myself being compelled by the following principles:

1. It is absolutely necessary, at this juncture in the Federation's life, that we maintain as much stability as we can; this is what prompted the Executive Committee's decision to recommend the appointment of a strong Acting Director for the interim or transitional period;
2. The personnel situation will force a reassessment of the Federation's objectives. This is timely and necessary too. I wish the reassessment to be something much more rigorous than the kind of introspective soul-searching in which we have engaged on numerous occasions in the past. In short, the reassessment must occur in the

midst of ongoing vigorous activity.

3. This is the time to test the organization's potential additional capacities. I would like this to be the thought that guides our interest in seeking additional funding in relationship to other funding sources. I think it will prove exceedingly difficult to secure general support funds from other agencies or foundations. But I believe it possible to secure funding, on a project-by-project basis, from such agencies or foundations. I'd like for this activity to occur during the fall months so that a preliminary report can be brought to the national conference.

4. It is absolutely vital to the welfare of our organization that we maintain a strong presence in Washington. Jack Duncan has helped immensely in this regard; so too has our decision to schedule our own board meetings more frequently in Washington. But we will have to think carefully about whether the Federation office should remain in Minneapolis. I'd like, at our upcoming meeting, to be able to decide upon the procedure by which this question can be resourcefully addressed.

5. I would wish that we could take steps to exorcise some of the hostility that defines our relationship with the Endowment. The institutional tensions will remain; if I am correct in my analysis, they are built into the nature of the relationship. But it ought to be possible

to cultivate more of an attitude of mutual respect and cooperation. After all, we're all in this together.

Our primary objectives are shared objectives.

I haven't become cynical, but I've wondered at times how important this work really is. There have been times, during the past two or three years, when products of our work have indeed contributed significantly to the vitality of the common good. There have been other times when projects of our sponsorship have probably failed to register much at all, except as influences within the lives of those who have been most directly involved. But the significant fact is that the program itself has not achieved the national stature that goes with having convinced the populace that state projects in the humanities are absolutely vital to the effective workings of a democratic society. Not once, during my tenure, have I seen such an attitude reflected in the media, say, or has it been supported on the Op/Ed pages of the major newspapers of the land. Not once have we made much news except when we have been involved in something that registers as political controversy. I say all of this to support the view that we still have a long ways to go, not because we haven't been introspective enough along the way but because there are larger challenges out there that we haven't met effectively. I believe organizations get stymied by internal considerations when the larger sense of purpose is unsure. All of which says that I hope we can utilize the transition period to gain a larger glimpse of some larger purposes, and I trust this can begin immediately. This, in my view, is

the only way to prevent the intrinsic tensions from being thoroughly debilitating.