

WHERE WE SEEM TO BE RIGHT NOW

The state programs were established on the assumption that the study of the humanities contributes to the ability to make reasoned decisions and that there are benefits to individuals, to scholarship, and to society when citizens who are beyond the years of their formal schooling and scholars with knowledge and training in the humanities join together in serious study and interpretation of the acts, works, and artifacts of human culture.

from Introduction to State Programs

The upcoming meeting of the Board of Directors of the National Federation of State Humanities Councils promises to be a crucial one. It would have been this way even if we hadn't received Steve Weiland's letter of resignation in mid-July. With Steve's departure, and now with Geri Malandra's leaving too, we have a network of personnel decisions to make. We must also take appropriate steps to insure that this transitional period in the life of the Federation 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 on the strengths and weaknesses of our organization in light of what we need to accomplish in the days, weeks and months ahead. I do not expect everyone on the Board to agree with my impressions and assessments, but I am jotting them down to add to the background against which we will make our decisions when we meet together. And I have organized these reflections around the several subtopics that seem to me to be most important.

### Our Relationship with Congress

Here, it is absolutely accurate to say, we deserve the highest of marks. The reception that Jack Duncan, Geri Malandra, and Steve have planned -- with strong assistance from Nancy Stevenson -- will testify to the effective efforts that have been made to plead our case before Congress and to receive most gratifying results. The Federation's role in the reauthorization process, its presence when congressional testimony was offered, and its influence over the decisions that were made as well as upon the forms in which they were delivered provide additional evidence of the effectiveness of our efforts. Victor Swenson and Nancy Stevenson were eloquent in addressing the House and Senate Committees. Jack Duncan proved himself to be an astute advisor, and the occasion gave all of us opportunity to observe how highly he is regarded on Capitol hill. And Geri didn't allow a single detail to go unnoticed or untended. It was an effective collective effort. And the event gave me an opportunity for a face-to-face, one-on-one conversation with Senator Pell. Consequently, when the Committee on Labor and Human Resources reported S. 1264, the bill to reauthorize the National Endowment for the Humanities, it utilized language that reflects very favorably upon the work of the Division of State Programs as well as upon the role of the Federation, as follows:

The Committee wishes to acknowledge the importance of the state/federal partnership that has developed between the state humanities councils and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Committee further recognizes the continuing need for this ongoing, cooperative relationship -- free of unnecessary procedures.... This positive partnership is reflected on many levels, and exemplified by such activities as the annual conference of state humanities

councils, organized by the councils through the National Federation of State Humanities Councils and supported by the Division of State Programs of the NEH; and Federation Review, the bimonthly journal of the councils, published by the Federation with contributions from the states and supported by the NEH

The recommendations continue:

The Committee wishes to reaffirm that the intent of Congress that a minimum of twenty percent of program funds within the total annual appropriations to NEH be allocated to the state humanities councils. It is the clear intent of the Committee that the twenty percent figure represent a floor, not a ceiling, on the amount to be appropriated annually for the councils. The councils, as prime forces in carrying out NEH's mandated public outreach goals, deserve as substantial financial support as is possible to provide. Over the past years, some council program budgets have been cut as much as twenty percent; it is the Committee's hope to avoid such radical fiscal changes in the future.

I need add nothing to the statement except, perhaps, to reiterate that this is the result of a very effectively-orchestrated Federation presence in Washington.

#### Our Relationship with the Endowment

Here the evidence is somewhat conflictory, and it is the element that pains me the most. For starters, I wish to record that the Endowment has played a transforming role in my own scholarly career, and from the very day that I was privileged to be involved in one of its programs. Through the years I have seen Endowment support transform educational institutions, revitalize sagging scholarly careers, bring projects into being that had no chance in any other way, while thoroughly edifying the public discussion of issues that need to be addressed collectively within a democratic society. I regard the establishment of a national endowment



there has been.

I've tried my hardest to discover its roots and means of sustenance, and I believe it lies in the posture that the several vested institutions are virtually obligated to take toward one another. For example, on the vital issue of congressional support for the Endowment, the Federation has found itself at odds with the disposition the administration of the agency has wished to take during the Reagan years. 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 even such streamlined budgets will 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 twenty-percent component ("not a ceiling, but a floor") in the authorizing legislation -- which nearly transposes the work of the state councils into an "entitlement" program -- we will find ourselves operating at something like cross-purposes with those whose positions require direct and indirect presidential approval. Given the dynamics of the situation, it should not surprise us when the tensions surface. I have thought at times that we should approach all of this without excess emotion, all of us trying our best to do our various tasks well, recognizing that each can be likened to selected parts in a drama that will get played out, in various forms, year after year. It would be presumptuous for any of us to expect that we might significantly alter the plot.

But, taking the official posture that it does in these matters, the Endowment must recognize that the Federation is not desiring to position itself as an enemy, rival or adversary. Rather, when federal funding support is threatened, or is severely diminished -- and we have experienced both of these within the past two years -- the Federation is challenged by the state councils to help restore what is lost, or, alternatively, to work diligently for increases. If we are successful at this, we are praised by the state councils (at least for awhile). If we are not successful, we become vulnerable to their threats to withdraw support. They praise us (by writing positive letters and friendly post-cards) for the other support services we provide. But when the crunch comes, it is the Federation's ability to effect budgetary success that scores most significantly with our constituents. Consequently, 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. When NEH Chairmen go before the state-council community, they know in advance that they will be asked to explain why they went before Congress with reduced budgetary proposals. And no matter what else we place on the agenda of our national conferences, we can anticipate that the budgetary questions will rise dramatically to the surface, almost regardless of the pre-arranged conference format. In plain terms, the state-council community looks to the Federation to maintain workable funding levels. This has frequently encouraged us to petition Congress to protect its duly authorized program. The irony is that the Federation has become the primary instrument in protecting federally-supported state programs in the humanities from the Endowment itself. As long as we must go before Congress from this

position -- which we will, indeed, which we must! -- the tensions will remain. But during the time when this climate prevails, it should not surprise us either that the agency will have questions about continuing as the virtual single-source supporter and benefactor of the Federation's program.

Our Relationship with our Constituents

Much of what can be said about our relationship with the fifty-three state humanities agencies upon whom we are dependent for support, and whom we represent, is already implicit in what has been noted in previous paragraphs. It need not be repeated.

Our fundamental challenges, in this regard, belong to those of all professional membership organizations. Membership organizations, characteristically, have no real business; what business they conduct is secondary to the primary involvements of their members. For example, whatever else the various state councils are, they are at least obligated to serve as regrant agencies through which federal monies are awarded to local institutions and groups in support of projects within their territories. Whatever else the Endowment is, it is at least obligated to dispense monies in support of worthy projects within the humanities, as defined within the authorizing legislation. Similarly, whatever else the Division of State Programs is, it is at least required to assist the work of the fifty-three state committees, and this also involves a dispensing of monies. The Federation (a membership organization) asks for money instead of being able to award, reward or dispense it. When it is successful in raising it (as it has been on

numerous occasions, as, for instance, when it helps raise or preserve the federal budgetary allocation, it benefits from its efforts, if at all, only indirectly. The Federation functions as broker, coordinator, mediator, facilitator, and as advocate, while having very little of its own to sell. Judgments about its successes and failures are based upon how well it is able, from its secondary position, to advance the primary work of its constituents. This, of course, is the lot of second-order (some say "meta-level") organizations. They work to make themselves indispensable to the work of the agencies and institutions they represent, but they would not exist without those agencies and institutions. Their work is designed to be supportive of other work. Were the other work not there, the membership organization would have no real work of its own.

Within such circumstances, it is understandable that the Federation has been called upon, again and again, to justify its existence. It is appropriate, too, that it has responded characteristically by explaining the meaning of its name, which name accords primacy to its constituent institutions. It is understandable, too, that the Federation has received plaudits when its ability to advance the primary work has become demonstrable. But, in the recent climate, such ability has involved the cultivation of strategies effectively to counteract the influence of other forces, many of which are also supported by vested interests. All of which says that a situation exists which not only must acknowledge that there is tension, but within which such tension can be exploited. And the spirit that is encouraged is a long ways from the spirit of cooperation and mutual support that was the dream of all of our founders.