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Grass-roots programs fostering interest in the humanities from coast to coast

Walter - for you from Ron Gross

By Ronald Gross
Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Washington

The humanities may be languishing on the nation's campuses, according to several recent national commission reports. But these subjects are thriving off-campus among adult learners who are encountering Shakespeare, Spinoza, and Spengler in sites as unlikely as union halls and prisons.

Each year millions of Americans explore history, philosophy, and literature in more than 4,000 "public humanities programs." These programs, sponsored locally by state humanities

councils, often have intensely personal impact.

"I never realized what my parents went through in coming to America," recalls May Schapp, who visited "Places of Origin," an exhibit at the American Museum of Immigration created through the auspices of the New York Council for the Humanities. "It started me reading some of the new books about that period. I never would have done that without seeing those photos of the old country."

Participants in these programs are studying not for academic credit, but for the joy of learning or to better

understand their world. "These people are discovering that they need the humanities to make informed decisions involving values in their personal and public lives," says Sondra Myers, president of the National Federation of State Humanities Councils.

In Massachusetts, a program on the theme of "Doing Justice" brought together professionals in the judicial system and humanities scholars to discuss "King Lear," "Billy Budd," and "Heart of Darkness." In Nevada, a film depicting the history of cattle ranching in the border area with California — "A

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Cowhand's Song: Crisis on the Range" — sparked discussion of proposals to limit grazing in recreational areas. Ohioans gathered for a laughter-spiced celebration of the 90th anniversary of the birth of humorist James Thurber, while Louisianans pondered a provocative episode in their past through a program on politician Huey Long.

Behind these activities are 53 state humanities councils (one in each state, plus Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands), organized 15 years ago by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

"The councils are neither federal nor state agencies, nor private foundations," says Margaret Kingsland, acting executive director of the councils' national association, headquartered in Minneapolis. "Yet they mix all three in their funding, control, and style," she says. "On the one hand, they're authorized by Congress and supported in part by earmarked funds channeled through the NEH. But the remainder of their budgets — matching and often exceeding the federal money — comes

from private sources within each state. . . ."

"Each state knows its own needs better than we can here in Washington," says John Agresto, acting chairman of the NEH. "This is federalism at its best: 53 laboratories for experimentation in the humanities, each one developing its own strengths. So you get top-flight projects on Faulkner in Mississippi, or work on Twain in Missouri. But some of the best ideas are replicable, and are picked up by other states." Town meeting-style discussion groups started in New England, for example, but have now spread to other states.

The councils themselves don't usually create the projects or conduct them. Rather, they invite proposals and choose among the submissions. Together they make available more than \$20 million annually for projects conducted by a host of nonprofit organizations — from colleges, museums, and libraries to unions, prisons, and citizens' groups. (Most grants are for only a few thousand dollars.)

Tapping the ingenuity of citizens throughout each state, the councils sponsor some imaginative ways to communicate the various disciplines. One produced a radio version of "The Odyssey." Another sponsored a film evoking the rich history of a vintage movie theater, while yet another funded a major exhibit of Middle East antiquities imported from a "sister city" in Egypt.

Looking to the future at their ninth annual anniversary conference late last year in Kansas City, Mo., state council leaders saw a growing need for their activities. "People don't come to these programs for simple answers to simple questions," concluded Walter Capps, outgoing president of the National Federation. "That's not what the humanities offer. Rather, they come and come again, to read, to think, to talk — preferably in that order — about matters they have been too busy to think about since they left school."

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