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DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA 93106

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Dr. Ron Herzman
Division of Fellowships and Seminars
National Endowment for the Humanities
Washington, D.C. 20506

Dear Ron:

I recognize that you are eager to have information concerning our experience with the Summer Seminars for Undergraduate Fellows. Consequently, I am writing my final report about the seminar on the day after the last day of the seminar. Just an hour ago I returned from the airport, after having taken the last group of participants there to catch their planes for the return trip home. Perhaps additional evaluation time will alter my reactions to the experience. But I am eager to get the first wave of response down on paper.

Much of what I could write about the seminar can be anticipated. Yes, the application process was not as smooth as it might have been. Many of my strongest applications came in after the announced time of the official deadline, and I found myself making arrangements and adjustments over the telephone. It turns out that 14 of the 15 persons in the seminar learned of the program through a faculty member. I would judge that at least 10 of those faculty members had been involved in an Endowment program before. This was the primary conduit of information. Only one of the 15 learned of the program through a flyer or an announcement on the bulletin board. This, together with the flexible deadline date, meant that I spent considerable time on the telephone reassuring faculty members that an application could be submitted late. It wasn't smooth, but it eventually worked. The applicants I selected were worthy of consideration.

I received something in the neighborhood of 125 letters of interest (including telephone requests), and about 65 completed applications. By contrast, when the program for secondary school teachers was first announced, I received over 1,100 letters of interest, and, as I recall, over 300 completed applications.

The most difficult aspect of the selection process relates not to the quality of the applicant but to the qualifications of his or her college or university. To be sure, I would not have accepted a candidate from Harvard or Yale or Amherst, from which institutions I received no applications. But I did have applicants from Creighton University, Gustavus

Adolphus College, and several from the SUNY system, none of which institutions seem intellectually impoverished. Most of the applications from students in such institutions were stronger than those from students in colleges I'd never heard of. Because I couldn't be absolutely sure that I had the ability to judge the quality of an institution, I took the strongest applicants. And it has turned out that the applicants from the strongest schools have also been the leaders in the seminar. Those promising candidates from schools I'd never heard of have held their own in the work of the seminar, perhaps, but they clearly belong to their own group in terms of academic preparation.

Once the selection was made, there were no problems in making contact with the chosen participants and in assembling the ingredients for the seminar. What struck me about this phase of the process, however, was that I was continuing to spend considerable time on the telephone explaining what our expectations are and how everyone was to plan for the journey to Santa Barbara. After I had done quite a bit of this, I realized that the selectees were phoning and writing me for reassurances. They had received the necessary information, but wanted to be certain that they had understood it correctly. I responded by sending them even more items in the mail; then I received calls regarding the materials I had sent. Again, this was in sharp contrast to the process that pertains to the work of the seminars for college teachers and high school teachers.

It was important, it seemed, that the fifteen persons be located in the same place in Santa Barbara. Consequently, I contracted for the use of the Kappa Kappa Gamma House, a sorority house in the campus community of Isla Vista, immediately adjacent to the campus. This presented no problems. The sorority house is equipped to house as many as forty persons. Since no one else is occupying it during the summer months, each participant could be assigned a single room. I was delighted with the arrangement, and even talked the managers into a rate that I thought was acceptable under the circumstances -- approximately 20% less than was charged when the secondary school teachers availed themselves of similar housing a year ago. But, to my consternation, several of the selectees believed that the price was too high, and asked if they could make their own arrangements. Had they been successful, I would have lost the sorority house. We needed a minimum of 15 persons (including a resident assistant) to make it feasible to take it over for the six weeks. Eventually, all but one person agreed to stay there, and it has turned out to be a wonderful asset. But the response of some of the selectees gave me some anxious moments. Much of this, too, was negotiated over the telephone.

I didn't want to go through the same process with travel

arrangements; so, with your counsel, I asked each participant to give me the relevant information to enable us to purchase the tickets here and then transmit them through the mails. Twelve of the fifteen participants allowed me to do this. One of the others was coming by automobile; and another had made arrangements for travel the day she was notified that she had been accepted. This took some doing -- a number of telephone calls and a number of letters back and forth -- but I am convinced that it was a good move on my part. I know it allowed us to keep costs with the amount prescribed for travel, and it saved considerable hassle. As it turns out, the three participants who made their own arrangements have encountered some difficulty in getting reimbursement checks. The University of California does not like to reimburse for travel until the trip is completed. Thus, we have had to secure exceptions to the rule that travel monies can be given to travelers before they begin their return trip.

Nearly everyone arrived by plane at the Santa Barbara airport. Because there was such uneasiness about how they would get from the airport to their living quarters, I volunteered to meet the planes of all who requested it. On Sunday June 23rd, I met all of the planes between 12 noon and 11:35 p.m. My strongest emotion at this point had nothing to do with reactions to how I was spending my time; rather, I found myself relieved whenever another one of the selectees arrived at the airport. Some even telephoned from along the way to tell me that they were enroute. By 11:35 p.m. all fifteen were present and accounted for.

I approached the intellectual work of the seminar with eyes and ears wide open. I wasn't sure what I had to work with. From the very first session, two of the three women who are in their thirties were the most outspoken, and those from schools I had never heard of remained very quiet. This, with some modification, has been the pattern throughout the six weeks.

I tested for background preparation, and learned that the overwhelming majority of the participants had strong personal feelings about religion, but, as far as I could tell, had not done much disciplined work in subjects like "civil religion in America," that is, in the more civic or collective or cultural aspects of religion. A number of the participants had had coursework in theology, and a number confessed to carrying strong commitments to the creeds or confessions of their respective churches. Consequently, it was a bit of a struggle to create interest in the subject of religion as it is approached within Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America. I wanted to talk about religion in its civic forms, as a component of culture; many of them wanted to talk about belief in God. I attempted to moderate

the discussion by giving them essays by Mircea Eliade, the very essays we utilize in our Introduction to Religion classes here at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Such essays, together with one or two video portrayals, seemed to help. But I found myself having to work to establish an intellectual context that I had been taking for granted in the years that I had been here.

As this was happening, the seminar was being affected by other significant elements. First of all, the group found itself to be very congenial. The fifteen participants came to know and love one another. More and more, they began looking out for themselves, and tending to each others' needs. Their participation in the work of the seminar became less stiff; those with less background were encouraged by the others. All of this was very positive, and I had been watching for it to happen. Secondly, only one person among the fifteen came with an automobile, and this was the person who chose to live somewhere other than at Kappa Kappa Gamma House. This meant that I had fourteen persons in Santa Barbara without transportation, except for local resources. Even to invite them to my home for dinner required that I rent a passenger van or enlist each member of my family in making trips back and forth to the sorority house. I have felt at times like a camp director or a boy scout leader. We have made this workable, but the group has not been easily mobile; and this has influenced our capabilities.

We did indeed, however, accomplish a number of objectives outside of our seminar sessions. We had a very stimulating evening at Santa Barbara's Old Mission, where three of our participants reflected on "the idealism of youth" in a forum that involved others including the president of St. Bonaventura University. We took a full day's boat ride to Anacapa Island, across the Santa Barbara Channel, and only one person became ill enroute. We rented a van to make a journey to Solvang, California, to witness a play in a newly-established Shakespearean Theatre. We visited the Monastery of the Poor Clares in Santa Barbara, and enjoyed a very stimulating conversation with several of the nuns. And we had evening sessions in which we enjoyed discussions with selected Vietnam War Veterans; Santa Barbara, as you know, has become a national leader in creating responses to the war. As much as possible, we tried to interpret our responses to such encounters in light of Alexis de Tocqueville's comments, for example, about the influence of war upon the dynamics of a democratic society. Again, all of this was very positive. It also brought considerable enjoyment.

As is my disposition, I required a lot of writing on the part of the participants. In fact, I assigned one brief paper per week; and for the final two weeks, the papers were to be in the 5-10 page (or over) range. I am convinced that this was a good move. It helped the participants to express them-

selves. It also served as a confidence builder. Needless to say, I wrote extensive criticisms on all of the papers, and worked with the participants individually. I would judge that each person turned in at least 25-30 pages of essay during the course of the six weeks, and some did as much as 60-75 pages. I recognize that this is a lot; but I think it worked well.

I also had individual conferences with the participants during the final days of the seminar. Virtually all of them wanted my reassurance that they had done well, or at least adequately. Many wanted more information about graduate schools. Virtually all of them wanted an opportunity to express gratitude to me, and to the Endowment, for the privilege they have had.

I thought it might be useful to know a bit more about the participants, so I devised some informal questionnaires for their responses. (See materials attached.) I was a bit surprised by some of these findings. It turns out that this was a fairly traditional group of students, with considerable institutional religious influence.

All in all, I'd say that the experience was a great success. The participants went away from here fully charged, I would say, to take the next important steps educationally speaking. They also developed a love and affection for each other -- and may I say, for me too? -- that they will give them considerable energy in the days, weeks, months and years ahead. They received much from each other. I could elaborate, but there is no need to....

And yet, I have some questions:

First of all, though this impression may be altered a bit with the increase of some retrospective time, I had the feeling throughout that the overall intellectual quality of our work did not really measure up, say, to that of a typical undergraduate UCSB course in the humanities. One of my guest lecturers -- an expert in nineteenth century American religious thought -- offered that his regular students at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh were as intellectually stimulating and stimulated as the fifteen we had assembled here. This may be overstating the situation, but it comes close to an apt comparison. For my part, I wouldn't have given many A grades to the work that I received from the participants. Chris Boltri, whom you know, was one of the top two or three participants; a number of the others seemed bright, but not distinguished, to me. And I am by no means an elitist in these regards.

Secondly, I found the seminar format difficult to work with. Our best seminar days occurred when I really took the lead and performed in modified lecturer fashion. Some of the group complained that when I attempted to conduct seminar

discussions, I was putting them under "too much pressure." This tells me that they weren't used to this kind of academic work.

Again, I mention this factor without being sure that it is real criticism. When I think of it, how many college juniors are ready for six weeks (averaging four sessions of three hours each) of rigorous seminar work? To utilize the seminar format is to employ a mechanism that tends to work well at the graduate level. But I found myself working very hard to make it effective in this situation.

Furthermore, college students are not used to a learning situation in which they meet for nearly three full hours, over a sustained period of time, to deal with a single subject. During the academic year, they are taking several courses at the same time. It requires significant adjustment to go from several courses taken simultaneously to a single sustained venture. College and secondary school teachers seem to covet such a format, but it requires significant adjustments in the attention mechanisms of college students.

Thirdly, the mix of twelve 20-22 year olds with three participants in their mid-30's carried some negative influences. I was pleased to have applications from college students who had gone back to school after having had children, etc., and, as I have indicated, found three who seemed fully qualified. All three have worked hard. But they are the questionable selections, in my judgment. In some respects they are overqualified; their ranges of experiences are greater than those of more typical college students. I also found them to be so affected by their own personal circumstances that they couldn't bring the same openness to learning that was characteristic of some of the others. I have indicated that this carried some negative influences. It would be more accurate to say that the consequences are mixed. But, contrary to my expectations, the inclusion of such persons is not an unqualified virtue.

Fourthly, with such diversity and rather flexible selection criteria, I sometimes had difficulty finding the common denominator of the group. Several within the group had had rather extensive background and training in the humanities. Some, for example, were religious studies or theology majors. Others, who had come out of vocational-training situations, had had virtually no previous exposure to the humanities. Consequently, some participants were eager to probe more deeply into subjects they already knew rather well, while others needed to get routing instructions to be able to penetrate the subject for the first time.

Finally, and, for me, most importantly, I never felt the sense of national urgency about my work with the Undergraduate

Fellows (such as I had felt the previous two summers when working with secondary school teachers). Instead, I understood myself to be involved in an enrichment program for fifteen competent but not highly distinguished college students. I enjoyed the experience, though I found myself feelings at times like a summer camp leader. And I came to grow very fond of the participants. I am confident that we will remain in close and frequent contact over the years. But I think I wanted to be able to tell myself that the program was having a greater national impact. It is remedial, in part, for students of considerable intellectual promise who find themselves in schools of modest resources. It is embellishment or enrichment, in part, for students who are already in good situations and desire an extra boost. And it carries the potentiality to steer all or most of the participants into significant vocations in the years ahead. In no sense can it ever be conceived as a waste of time for those who participate. And yet, when the local newspaper reporter and I sat down to decide on a story line for an article in the paper, we couldn't find it. And this is significant. Without greater clarity about the criteria for selection, I think it is difficult to be sufficiently clear about the program's objectives.

I hope there will be a time when experienced directors might meet to discuss their responses. Perhaps I am alone in feeling the way I do. But I would not expect so.

I appreciate the opportunity I have had, and I thank you and the Endowment for it. I have been very candid in this report. I hope you find it useful.

Sincerely,

Walter H. Capps