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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6100

October 22, 2013

The Honorable Carol M. Watson
Acting Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Chairman Watson:

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has a broad mission, which includes protecting the cultural, artistic, and historical identity of America, but the statute which created NEH also requires that funding “contribute to public support and confidence in the use of taxpayer funds” 20 USC §951(5) (2013). I affirm the value of the humanities, but we all recognize that care and discipline must be exercised by any government agency that decides to favor certain projects over others. Recent NEH expenditures raise questions about whether the Endowment is meeting this requirement.

According to the NEH website, your mission is accomplished by “awarding grants for top-rated proposals examined by panels of independent, external reviewers.” In this time of constrained budgets, I am interested in understanding what qualifies as a “top-rated” proposal.

For example, a review of your most recent education program grants reveals that funds have been provided to study, among other things (topic and grant amount):

- “What is the meaning of life?” (\$24,953);
- “Why are we interested in the past?” (\$24,803);
- “What is the good life and how do I live it?” (\$25,000);
- “Why are bad people bad?” (\$23,390);
- “What is belief?” (\$24,526);
- “What is a monster?” (\$24,999); and
- “Why do humans write?” (\$24,774).

In the current fiscal environment, I question the appropriateness of such grants, and believe the public would benefit from a fulsome explanation of the entire review process which solicits education grant input, assesses and prioritizes proposed projects, reviews and recommends projects and awards, and then seeks value for taxpayer monies spent.

In addition to education grants, operations of your “Bridging Cultures Bookshelf Administration” program also bear scrutiny. Recent press reports indicate that NEH has launched a project to distribute books related to Islam to over 900 libraries across the United States, and to offer grants to book recipients to hold related forums. This triggers questions about what the Federal government is funding in this area, and the perspectives represented by the publications and forum organizers.


I would like to know more about how NEH determines what research actually contributes to public support and confidence in the use of taxpayer funds. To that end, please respond to the following:

1. Please explain the peer review process for all grants awarded in the education programs division, with a grant period after April 30, 2013.
2. Are all grants in the education programs division peer reviewed? If some grants do not undergo a peer review process, please explain why and how grant determinations are made, in absence of the review process.
3. Please provide the list of peer reviewers for all grants awarded in the education programs, with a grant period after April 30, 2013.
4. Please provide, on an individual basis, the number and total dollar amount of grants awarded to those participating as peer reviewers in the education programs division, with a grant period after April 30, 2013.
5. Please explain the peer review process for Bridging Cultures Bookshelf: Muslim Journeys.
6. Please provide a list of the peer reviewers for Bridging Cultures Bookshelf: Muslim Journeys.
7. Please provide an itemized list of all spending related to Bridging Cultures Bookshelf: Muslim Journey and any closely related projects.
8. One would think that NEH takes a fair and balanced approach to promoting culture. Please provide an itemized list, over the last five years, of all spending related to Christianity (e.g, Protestantism—Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal— or Catholicism) or Judaism where books or forums promoting one point of view were provided to libraries, etc.

The House, in the FY 2014 Interior and Environment Appropriations bill, has proposed to cut NEH funding by almost 50 percent. Using taxpayer dollars to fund education program grant questions that are very indefinite or in an effort to seemingly use Federal funds on behalf of just one religion, does not on its face appear to be the appropriate means to establish confidence in the American people that NEH expenditures are wise. Hopefully, your answers will help alleviate these concerns.

Please have your staff provide this information both in hard copy and in an electronic, searchable format no later than November 25, 2013, to William Smith on the Senate Committee on the Budget. If you have any questions, please contact me or have your staff contact Mr. Smith at (202) [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Very truly yours,



Jeff Sessions
Ranking Member