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April 9, 2014

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

Dear Acting Chairman Watson:

I appreciate your November 25, 2013, response to my letter from October 22, 2013, and am glad to hear that the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) shares my belief that “the grants NEH funds must ‘contribute to public support and confidence in the use of taxpayer funds.’” I remain concerned, however, that our shared beliefs do not seem to be reflected in a number of projects NEH is currently funding. For instance, the “Enduring Questions” program is designed to provide course grants to answer questions which have “more than one plausible or compelling answer.” Questions such as “what is friendship?” may achieve the goal of producing unlimited conversation with indefinite answers, but that does not necessarily make them worthy of tax dollars.

A recent *USA Today* column, “Romancing Uncle Sam: Nothing is too stupid for Washington to subsidize,”¹ raises substantive questions about NEH’s involvement in the Popular Romance Project (“PRP”). According to the PRP website, the program “will explore the fascinating, often contradictory origins and influences of popular romance as told in novels, films, comics, advice books, song, and internet fan fiction, taking a global perspective—while looking back across time as far as the ancient Greeks.” The *USA Today* columnist observes: “As much as I’d like to know what the ancient Greeks thought about popular romance as told in comics and advice books, I wouldn’t pay to find out. And I’m guessing, neither would you.” I believe this statement is accurate, but those in charge of NEH funding apparently disagree.

¹ Available at <http://usat.ly/1ecqWkR>.

News reports indicate that NEH has contributed close to \$1 million to the PRP. According to the funded project query on the NEH website, \$250,000 was awarded for the website, \$48,000 for final planning and film scripting, and \$616,000 for the production of a two-hour documentary. The broad mission of NEH might be read to encompass this project, but that does not mean NEH is obligated to fund it. Care and discipline must be exercised by government agencies expending the resources of the taxpayer. As the author of the editorial notes: "If the people want romance, they have to pay for it themselves ..." The PRP also appears to be duplicative of other scholarly efforts that do not rely on taxpayer money, such as the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance.

I am also concerned about your Summer Seminar series. On its face, this program appears to provide a free vacation for participants, with little or no requirements beyond the application process. Participants in the program, apparently randomly selected, receive a financial award to help cover travel, room and board, and "research expenses." The financial awards, according to the NEH website, range from \$1200 to \$3900, depending on the length of the program. Individuals who submit proposals for a Summer Seminar and direct the project receive a salary ranging from \$15,000 to \$22,500. This financial award does not include the money NEH provides to develop a program.

In one successful application for a Summer Seminar, a day is set aside to "[visit] the Museum of the Great War at Péronne, the Devonshire Cemetery at Mametz, the British Memorial at Thiepval, and the Newfoundland Memorial at Beaumont-Hamel." Later in the seminar, the group is led to two memorials "in the heart of Paris." For part of the trip, the group resides at an apartment building in Caen where "each participant will have a completely furnished studio apartment with a fully equipped kitchen, bathroom, television, and balcony. Linen and cleaning services is provided once a week..."

There is also a fundamental problem with this program. It does not have any comprehensive, systematic impact.

This summer you plan to pay the expenses for people to travel to, among other places:

- London – "Chaucer's Canterbury Tales";
- Berlin – "Migration and German Culture: Berlin's Diversity Across Two Centuries";
- Paris and Normandy – "Memories Divided and Reconciled: World Wars I and II in France Today"; and
- Vienna – "Mozart's Worlds: The Marriage of Figaro and Don Giovanni."

While a number of people enjoy travel and would like to explore these areas, I doubt they would expect others to pay for it.

I must therefore repeat my initial question about how NEH determines what research actually contributes to public support and confidence in the use of taxpayer funds, and request that you respond to the following:

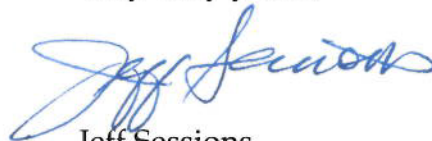
1. In regards to the Enduring Questions program, are the votes of the Education Committee of the National Council on the Humanities made public? Are projects approved by a simple majority or some other vote threshold?
2. In regards to the Enduring Questions program, please submit the list of proposals denied funding and an explanation of why for the last two years data is available.
3. In responding to my initial correspondence you indicated that none of the peer reviewers had received a grant during the time period I requested. Please provide, on an individual basis, the number and dollar amount of grants awarded to the 112 peer reviewers you identified, regardless of the time period.
4. The PRP is funded through the Division of Public Programs. How long has this section been in existence? Please identify any additional romance projects and the amount of funding for each project NEH has funded the last five years. In addition, please explain how these films or projects have deepened the understanding of the humanities or contributed to public support and confidence in the use of taxpayer funds.
5. Has NEH ever obtained an outside independent review to determine how effective the funding of projects like the Enduring Questions, PRP, and others have been in carrying out NEH's aim of deepening the public understanding of significant questions? Please provide any results of the outside independent review. If no review exists, please explain how NEH assesses the effectiveness of the taxpayer money it gives away.
6. The ultimate goal of the PRP is to produce a film entitled "Love Between the Covers." Please explain how NEH believes funding for this project specifically contributes to public support and confidence in the use of taxpayer funds.
7. Please explain any requirements to participate in the Summer Seminar series, beyond and not identified in the application process. State specifically whether the participants, after the seminar is completed, must submit anything in writing to NEH regarding the experience and how it will benefit the public and the schools they are teaching in.
8. Please identify each NEH employee who has attended/participated in a seminar, work-related or otherwise, and provide an itemized list of all related expenses covered by NEH for each employee.

9. Please provide a list of all expenses covered by NEH for the Summer Seminar series and any expenses that are excluded. Please state specifically whether participants are provided with a stipend during their travels.
10. Please provide the cost per teacher and student for the Summer Seminar series. In addition, please provide the number of teachers attending each program, the number of repeat attendees, even if for a different seminar, and the number of instructors teaching the same seminar over the last 10 years.
11. Please explain whether NEH considers whether a project is duplicative prior to funding and whether NEH took in consideration that there were other romance novel studies and websites already in existence.

Now is not the time for us to come up with creative ways to spend money. Now is the time for us to come up with creative ways to save money. NEH is obligated to do its part. Eliminating some of these programs might be necessary.

Please have your staff provide this information both in hard copy and in an electronic, searchable format no later than May 7, 2014, 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 [REDACTED], or [REDACTED].

Very truly yours,



Jeff Sessions
Ranking Member

JS:ws:ph