

Chapter 2

Postscript: The Endowments at Fifty

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ABSTRACT

At the height of the culture wars, I was Executive Director of the New Jersey Council for the Humanities (NJCH), one of the state programs affiliated with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Like all state humanities councils, NJCH was a nonprofit organization governed by a board of academics and public-spirited citizens. At the time it was almost entirely dependent on the NEH for funding. If the NEH were eliminated, the NJCH—like most of the humanities councils in the 55 other states and territories—would cease to exist. Our grants provided program support for speakers at local libraries, small exhibits at museums and historical organizations, and public programs organized by nonprofits, community colleges, and local community groups. Our budget was not large but it was important to our communities. In New Jersey we ultimately found new sources of support in private donations, foundation grants, and a modest appropriation from the New Jersey legislature. This chapter, written in 2015, reconsiders the status of the cultural endowments during their fiftieth anniversary. As we prepare to go to press in early 2017, there are reports that as part of his budget-cutting agenda, President Trump plans to eliminate the endowments (Bolton, 2017).

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INTRODUCTION

The National Endowments were fifty years old in 2015. They seem smart but subdued, still suffering—and certainly changed, perhaps for the better—from the trauma of the 1990s. Their budgets, which grew modestly during the first years of the Obama administration, fell again after 2010 when control of the House returned to the Republicans and all federal agencies suffered the effects of “sequestration.” The heightened media frenzy about the culture wars has subsided, but critics of both endowments remain and their leaders are obviously determined to deflect charges of elitism by promoting programs and maintaining visibility in areas not traditionally associated with cultural audiences.

Funding

The FY 2015 appropriations for the two endowments are \$146 million each. The funding level is unchanged from 2014, but that obscures the starker reality that neither endowment’s budget has substantially changed since 1998—the low point of the culture wars.

As always, funding for the cultural endowments is an infinitesimal portion of the federal budget—now about \$0.90 per person in the population of the United States, a bit less than even the miniscule two postage stamps of a generation ago. (USCB, 2014, n.p.)

While the equal funding level implies a modest parity between the two agencies, the NEH’s financial position is more precarious than it was during the culture wars (and its immediate aftermath) when the NEA was “punished” for “doing bad things.” Beginning in 1989 and until 2008, the NEH’s annual appropriations were consistently larger than those of the NEA. Since 2008 the two have received equal appropriations, but that “equality” came at the price of more modest increases for the NEH in the last half-dozen years. The NEA’s budget increased by nearly half in the decade 1998–2008, while the NEH’s was apparently pegged to the arts endowment’s and increased by less than a third.

Although inflation has been at low levels throughout the 2000s, inflation had a disproportionate effect on the two endowments. With its larger annual increases to achieve parity with the NEH, the NEA more than kept pace with inflation, while the NEH fell behind. The NEA grew from \$98 million to more than \$144 million, a 48 percent increase, while the NEH, during the same period, starting at almost \$111 million increased by 31 percent.

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