

Why Humanities Policy Belongs
on the Public Agenda
by Lawrence Rothfield
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Working Paper

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Background Document for Art, Culture, and the National Agenda:

Why Humanities Policy Belongs on the Public Agenda

A summary of the broad issue

Within the cultural sector, the humanities play a crucial role, if a largely underappreciated one. Yet by almost any measure, the humanities at the turn of the 21st century are suffering a major crisis brought on by a combination of demographic, economic, and technological changes. To respond to these challenges, new public policies are urgently needed

Explanation of the relevance to the nation

An effective public policy towards culture must not limit its view of culture to the living arts alone. To do so would be like thinking that health care could be promoted by focusing only on HMOs and pharmaceutical companies, or that the environment consisted of nothing more than endangered species. Like these other policy fields, so culture needs to be understood as an internally complex sector in which the vitality of the most visible part depends on less visible but no less crucial subsectors. For culture, this means recognizing that the arts themselves, and our ability to benefit from them, depend crucially on the humanities. It also means recognizing that the goods produced by humanists provide an immense direct public benefit in their own right.

These benefits are easy to describe, albeit difficult to measure. Humanists play an indispensable role in preserving, renovating, and educating the American public about the cultural traditions that make us Americans. Humanists contribute theories of justice, liberty, individuality and community that help clarify and guide political debate and judicial actions. And by equipping citizens with the languages, deliberative capacities, historical perspective and interpretive skills needed to understand other cultures in this age of globalization, ethnic fragmentation, and what Samuel Huntington warns may be an impending “clash of civilizations,” humanists help America engage intelligently with the world.

In that sense, the humanities is arguably more important to America’s future than it has ever been. But the humanities also offers help in dealing with a threat that is not so much political as it is economic. As the knowledge economy takes hold in the 21st

century, the ability to distill meaning from information derived from many different contexts, and to convey meaning effectively, will become more and more valuable. These are precisely the creative and communicative skills that humanists teach, and that companies will be demanding. Most directly, of course, such skills feed into America's entertainment industry. Schindler's List would never have come to the screen without the work done by Holocaust scholars; Boys Don't Cry was inspired by academic thinking about gender and identity; literary critics kept Jane Austen vital enough to be updated as Clueless; Star Wars grew out of the ideas supplied by comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell; the new sounds we hear on the radio owe much to the fieldwork of ethnomusicologists; Disney's historical theme-parks and the American Girl dolls rest on the contributions of historians and anthropologists. In ways that have not been well-tracked by economists, humanists provide our cultural producers with the imaginative capital of ideas, images, symbols, stories, sounds, and gestures, that can be put to work to produce profitable new books, movies, paintings, or performances.

It is the non-profit arts, however, that are most dependent on the humanities, not simply for input that scholars can provide into the creative process, but for the perhaps even more crucial work humanists do in preparing audiences to make sense of what they see, hear, and read. Indeed, it is arguable that without the kind of education provided by humanists, the non-profit arts would lose their audiences. We lack the definitive survey work to confirm this intuition, but what we do know about public participation in the arts – that educational level is the best predictor of attendance at arts activities – generally supports it.

In short, the humanities provides basic sustenance for the creative sector and entertainment industry, as well as for knowledge workers and the protectors and purveyors of America's ideals. Given all the many different kinds of good it does, and its critical importance to the value-chain for the arts in particular, one might imagine that to ensure its health the humanities would be tended to assiduously by arts policymakers, arts funders, and the public in general. Unfortunately, the opposite is the case. By almost any measure -- numbers of applicants to graduate school, the academic job market for humanities Ph.D.s, academic publishing, or fellowship aid from government and foundations -- the humanities are in the midst of a quiet but deep crisis, and new policy initiatives, backed by fresh ideas and informed by careful research, are urgently needed to address it.

Brief history of this issue's role in the past

Although cultural policy experts often speak in the same breath of "the arts and humanities," the humanities has long received both less public attention and less direct funding than the arts. Indeed, the humanities has always been what former NEA Chairman Frank Hodsoll calls "a bit of an orphan".¹ While Joan Cherbo has identified more than 200 federal-level arts programs emanating from a wide range of federal offices, humanities has been funded much more narrowly and parsimoniously. At the state level, state humanities councils are independent non-profit entities dwarfed by state arts agencies (which sometimes even administer funding to the humanities councils!).

And foundation support for the arts is roughly thirty times larger than that for the humanities, which depends disproportionately on a single source, the Mellon Foundation. While visual arts centers such as the Getty are being lavishly endowed, independent research centers and research libraries, once well-endowed, now operate at a chronic deficit.

There are obvious reasons why this might be so. As interpretive arts, the humanities seem secondary to, and less sexy than, the living arts they interpret, caught up in thoughts rather than sensations, words rather than experiences. Moreover, much research done by humanists does not speak directly to the public, and some of it is difficult to understand in any case. For both these reasons, the payoff for investing in the humanities is less straightforward even than for investing in the arts. And since most humanists are located within universities, the funding streams that do exist are masked, displacing both a sense of public responsibility for and public awareness of the condition of this subsector of cultural activity.

But these structural features of the humanities within the cultural sector do not explain why things have gotten so much worse in the humanities over the past several decades.

Current policies/actions at the national level

Clinton-era policy towards the humanities has emphasized the vigorousness and uniqueness of America's various regional cultures and folkloric traditions, proposed new programs aimed at delivering grants to underserved geographic areas, institutions, and communities, and called for a "national conversation" about American identity. This tendency toward populism continued the trend established between 1982 and 1994 of shifting NEH funding and challenge grants from the academic sector to state and public programs. The one area where funding for academic humanities increased was in allocations for preserving deteriorating paper-based library collections.ⁱⁱ

But these policies did little to address the challenges posed to the university-centered humanities by demographic, economic, and technological pressures. (Indeed, by all but shutting down its own policy research wing, which might have supplied inconvenient data, the NEH went out of its way to avoid noticing such pressures.) Between 1960 and 1990, college enrollments rose from 3.5 to 15.3 million, fueled by an explosive growth in community colleges from 400,000 to 6.5 million. As might be expected, these students have tended toward more practical and business-oriented majors, so that the overall number of Americans graduating with B.A.s in English has remained stagnant as the number of business degrees has soared. Even in Research I universities (those offering at least 40 Ph.D. degrees annually in five or more disciplines), however, the percentage of B.A.s awarded in the humanities dropped 25% between 1966 and 1993.

The effect of this demographic shift, and of the concurrent "flight from the arts and sciences" as possible careers that Sarah Turner and William Bowen have analyzed, has been a double brain drain. On one hand, the number of applicants to top doctoral

programs in the central humanistic disciplines of English and History has dropped 30% in the last four years, threatening the quality of the next generation of humanists. On the other hand, the growth of the undergraduate population has dramatically shifted the teaching function of English towards composition and lower-level elective courses, since almost every undergraduate takes at least one of these. To teach these courses, universities have increasingly turned to part-time adjunct faculty and to graduate student labor. An intellectual proletariat has been created, grossly exploited and alienated from university, while the number of professorial-rank faculty has shrunk.ⁱⁱⁱ Movements toward unionization of graduate-student and part-time faculty are already well under way, and likely to accelerate in the next decade absent strong countervailing federal efforts to shore up the profession.

The most obvious national policy tool to address this problem is federal fellowship aid for graduate students in the humanities. As Neil Rudenstine has noted, because the reward structure of humanities as a vocation limits the self-financing that could be expected, “providing sufficient financial assistance to doctoral candidates is especially important in the arts and sciences.” Yet graduate students in the humanities rely on personal resources in greater percentages than the average doctoral student, even though the gap in starting salaries between literature and economics, law, engineering, or computer science professors has grown from \$10,000 in 1990 to \$15,000 in 1996. While the opportunity costs of pursuing a career in the humanities have soared (and with them the attrition rate among doctoral students), Federal support for graduate students – the Education Department’s Javits and Fulbright scholarships and Foreign Language and Area Studies grants -- has remained stagnant.^{iv} The NEH dissertation grants program was obliterated after the devastating budget cuts of 1996.

For those lucky few who succeed in landing a tenure-track job at salary levels more and more incommensurate with those of non-humanist academics, the chances of finding funding to pursue scholarly research have declined markedly over the past decade. As John D’Arms has shown, traditional sources of support for humanists (NEH, but also National Humanities Center, ACLS, National Humanities Center, and the major foundations who funded the latter two) have dried up, with both the government and foundations prioritizing interdisciplinary, social-change-oriented, collaborative projects, while shifting responsibility for funding individual humanist scholars to colleges and universities, which have proved generally unwilling or unable to make up for the losses from these sources.

Even if a humanist succeeds in obtaining the support needed to research and write a book, however, economic forces both within and outside the university conspire to make it increasingly difficult to successfully do so. Since the Bayh-Dole Act encouraged universities to generate knowledge that is patentable, humanists have gotten priced out of what has become a Darwinian marketplace of ideas. Many have noted the danger posed to scholarship when scientists are faced with the choice of publishing or selling their discoveries, or when corporations reach directly into departments to shape research agendas, but for the unprofitable humanities the danger is that scholarship itself will be eclipsed. When a scientific journal such as Tetrahedron Letters costs \$7500 per year, the

humanities pays the price: reduced library budgets for book-buying raise prices and cut print runs for new books in the humanities. Even university presses now operate under pressure to function as profit centers. The result: the death, by starvation, of the scholarly monograph and the first book. Outside academia, the conglomeratizing of the music and publishing industries is choking off the production of records and books that have little chance for short-term crossover success; back-list thinking, which once allowed classical music, opera, and initially unprofitable but potentially immortal literature to stay in print, has become obsolete.

It is possible that the digital revolution will help humanists surmount some of these difficulties, by providing much cheaper ways to publish books, recordings, and images. For now, however, humanists are being hamstrung by an absence of clear standards for fair use of digitized knowledge. And the one major piece of federal legislation passed in the past decade that is likely to have the most impact on the price of information – the Copyright Extension Act of 1997– has actually postponed the entry of works into the public domain, making it more difficult for humanists (as well as artists) to use images and words that would otherwise have been available. Moreover, distance learning is much more likely to benefit non-humanistic disciplines where knowledge can be tested more easily, and hence the relative unprofitability of the humanities will only become more clear.

Priorities for the Nation

The next President and Congress should take a series of legislative and administrative steps to counteract the demographic, economic, and technological pressures that threaten to implode the humanities. Rather than trying to shield humanists – an impossible task – national policies should find ways to help humanists manage, and even benefit from, these challenges.

Legislative actions (authorization, appropriation, allocation)

- Supplement the National Endowment for the Humanities with a National Trust for the Arts and Humanities. Funds for this could be generated initially by a tax on copyrights held more than 50 years as of 1997—that is, on copyright protection added by the Copyright Extension Act of 1997. As Richard Epstein has argued, this act amounted to a giveaway of billions of dollars in value to holders of copyrighted materials that would otherwise have been in public trust. Since artists and humanists are the groups most harmed by this giveaway, a good case can be made for a *quid pro quo*.^v
- Enact tax legislation to help limit the pay differentials between faculty in the humanities and those in other areas of the university, and provide tax credits for graduate students in the humanities.
- Explore new mechanisms to encourage investments by publishers and recording companies in works whose value only emerges on the backlist.
- Amend Bayh-Dole to insure that a higher percentage of profits from academic research projects goes to the university rather than to individual professor-inventors and their corporate sponsors.

- Develop new sources of federal funding to help sustain language teaching in the aftermath of the Cold War and the loss of defense-related funding sources. In the wake of the World Trade Center attacks, the costs of failing to graduate a single doctoral student with expertise in the language of the Taliban should be clear.
- Allocate funding to support both research and publication-related costs for individual scholars in the text-based humanities.
- Expand funding of NEH Summer Seminars for high-school teachers.
- Allocate additional funds for new programs in public humanities education:
 1. Nationwide reading groups, administered with the help of university-based humanities centers, aimed at helping spread the joys of reading and discussing great literature.
 2. Humanities in the Arts: a program to add a humanities component provided by academia to enrich the experiences provided by museums, operas, theatres, or dance companies. One of the fastest-growing areas of public humanities is in museum education (the Metropolitan Museum's education budget alone would be the envy of most humanities deans), yet there is very little direct collaboration between museums and university-based humanities; in the other arts, there is strikingly little humanistic input of any kind. This program would help prepare those attending a challenging art exhibition, a ballet, or a jazz performance to get more out of such experiences.

Administrative actions (structure and organization or personnel, regulation, leverage points for national policies at state, local, and private levels)

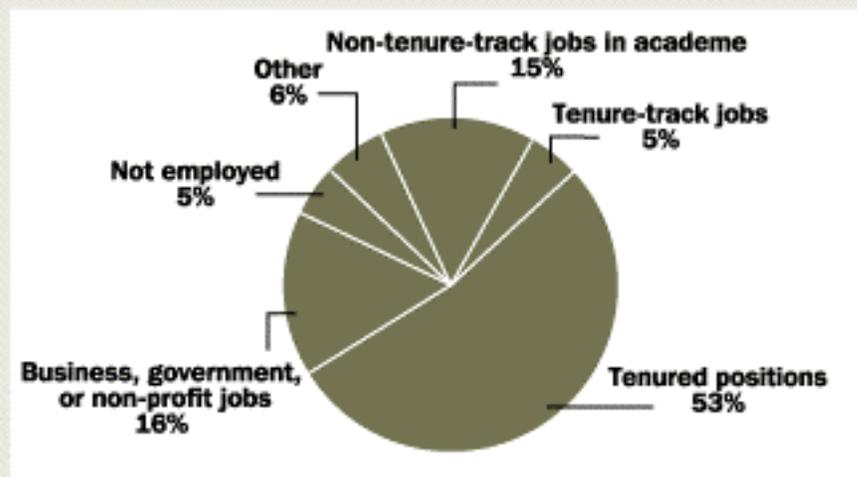
- Create an office – preferably within the NEH, but if in Education, then linked to the NEH -- to study humanities policies. This office should develop the statistics, analyses, and policy options needed to help policymakers assess things like the state of scholarly publishing, the career structure of academic humanists, and the effectiveness of existing programs.
- Establish clear “fair use” guidelines that give wide latitude for academically-based humanists to quote or show images from materials available via the internet.
- Encourage strategic planning between NEH, state humanities councils, and university-based humanities centers.
- Investigate price-gouging by commercial publishers of academic journals.
- Expand the Smithsonian's innovative recording initiative to include not just indigenous and folk music but opera, classical music, and other forms of “high” art that are threatened by conglomeratization.

What We Know

Relevant facts and statistics that support an assessment of the current situation; please include data in forms suitable for presentation in sidebars and illustrations (charts, graphs, etc.).

Unemployment rates among humanities Ph.D.s.

1995 Status of Ph.D. Recipients in English, 1983-85



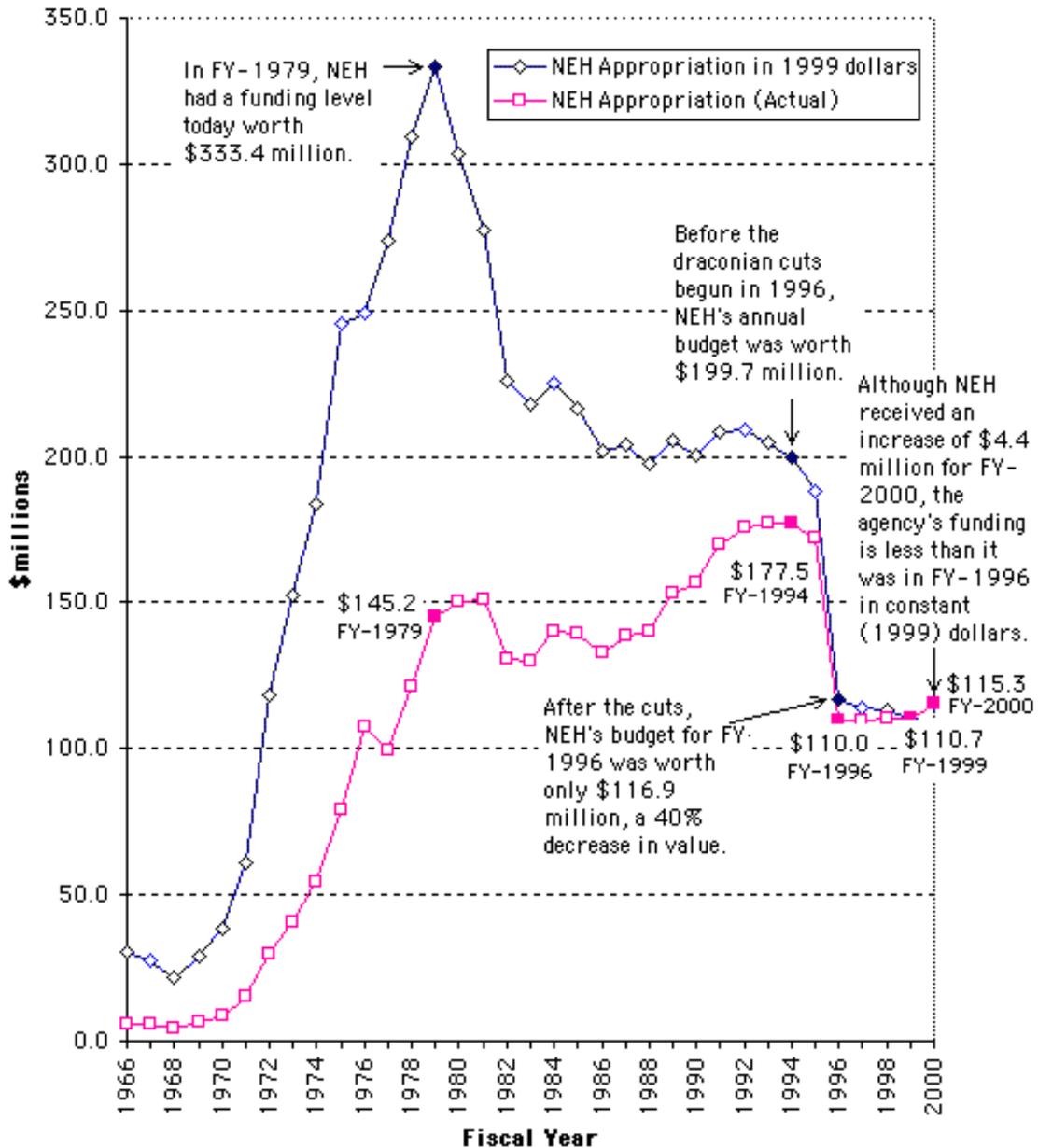
Source: "Ph.D.'s - Ten Years Later," University of California at Berkeley

Chronicle chart by Margaret Ross

Applications to Graduate Departments of English and History, 1995-1999

Year	1995	1997	1998	1999
	7,237	5,807	5,494	5,380

Declining Budget Value: Appropriations for the National Endowment for the Humanities in constant (1999) dollars, FY-1966 to Present



National Humanities Alliance

Some effects of NEH cuts:

- Summer seminars and institutes for teachers have been cut by 2/3
- The cumulative audience for quality humanities programming fell by 70 million viewers.

- Research and scholarship projects have fallen precipitously (though tellingly, the NEH Chair failed to put a figure to this in his Congressional testimony).^{vi}

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John Sutherland, "Who Owns John Sutherland?", London Review of Books, vol. 21, no. 1 (Jan. 7, 1999), <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n01/suth2101.htm>. A view of the devastating effects on the humanities of changes in copyright law, electronic technology and commercial practice.

Jason Epstein, "The Rattle of Pebbles," New York Review of Books, April 27, 2000, <http://www.nybooks.com/nyrev/WWWarchdisplay.cgi?20000427055F>. An insider's diagnosis of the harm done to literature by the vertical integration of the contemporary publishing and bookselling industry.

ⁱ Frank Hodson's comments are from a roundtable discussion, published as "Are We Ready for a Cabinet-Level Position for Culture?", Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School.

ⁱⁱ John D'Arms, "Funding Trends in the Academic Humanities," in Alvin Kernan, ed., What's Happened to the Humanities? (Princeton Press, XXX).

ⁱⁱⁱ See the "Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing: Executive Summary," in Profession 1999, 275-281.

^{iv} National Research Council, The Path to the Ph.D.: Measuring Graduate Attrition in the Sciences and Humanities (1997). <http://books.nap.edu/books/0309054826/html/R1.html#pagetop>

^v Richard Epstein, "Congress's Copyright Giveaway," Wall Street Journal, December

21, 1998, at A19. For a fuller version of Epstein's argument, see "Maintaining the Status Quo in Intellectual Property," Arts and Humanities in Public Life conference, University of Chicago, Jan. 1999, <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/artspublic/conf1999/epstein.html>

^{vi} Testimony of William R. Ferris, Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities, before the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies, U.S. House of Representatives March 23, 2000, <http://www.neh.fed.us/news/chairman/speeches/20000323.html>.