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Writing Studies at the MLA: The Past and Future of English Studies
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Millions of Dollars Might Get You Into the MLA: When NEH Funding Shaped the State of Writing Studies in English Studies

When I inherited my first full-time, non-tenure track writing program administrator position from a retiring director, I couldn’t make sense of why a senior philosopher called me to welcome me to campus or why near retirement tenured faculty in the humanities -- philosophy, Spanish literature and film, German, cultural geography -- so comfortably and vocally valued student peer review and informal writing. Then I realized my predecessor, Leone, had left behind a filing cabinet drawer of carefully labeled folders. These chronicled the writing program’s slow decline from 1977, the year she was hired by the faculty project directors of Clark University’s Program of Humanistic Studies into a position funded by a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. Once that grant ended, no one on campus cared much about the writing program or writing center as institutionalized structures. And no one thought of them as particularly connected to English as a department or discipline. However, the joy of the NEH rich years of shared commitment to humanities education within and across disciplines lived on, as did some adopted writing pedagogy.

So I began researching National Endowment for the Humanities funding for writing where I was most personally connected, with the mid-1970s grants given for writing intensive course clusters and cross-disciplinary faculty development at small
colleges. Following published references to NEH funded writing programs led me to those most of us know – the Bay Area Writing Project, funded into the National Writing Project, Elaine Maimon’s grants at what was then called Beaver College, summer seminars led by Young, Corbett and Williams, the two year Iowa Institute directed by Carl Klaus and colleagues. I set out to discover as much as I could about what came of this funding – for individuals, for institutions and for rhetoric, composition and writing program administration. After visiting the NEH in Washington to read the old McBee computer cards that chronicled the agency’s early grants, using Freedom of Information Act requests to collect governmental grant materials, and interviewing project directors and faculty who took part in NEH supported writing initiatives, I learned just how few of the NEH funded writing projects we’ve actually described in retelling our own disciplinary history.

Today, I want to suggest that while the wider history of NEH funding of writing reveals a well-resourced, well networked effort, one that helped composition become more established, more recognized, more respected, and more fully seen as part of the humanities at institutions and nationally, the loss of NEH funding may have troubled composition’s relationship to the humanities. That loss forces us to ask, even today, what writing studies’ relationship as a discipline is to the humanities and how we will develop what we want it to be in the future.

Rhetoric and composition was supported early by funds distributed through the NEH’s Fellowship Division, because Summer Seminars and Fellowships in Residence for College Teachers that were focused on rhetoric and composition were offered from the very first summer they were initiated, 1973, through the 1980s. But what built the NEH’s budget was not just what
humanities supporters had anticipated when they sought the creation of the NEH – long desired support for humanities faculty and their individual scholarly projects. It was, instead, the NEH’s stated interest in education that helped the agency grow. As the NEH’s first annual report described: “The third objective of the Endowment is the improvement of the teaching of the humanities in schools, colleges, and universities and also among the public at large in order to infuse our present activities with the wisdom that is the product of the humanistic outlook” (8). Interestingly, from the outset, the NEH publicly described this third objective as “probably the most important of the objectives” and “also the most difficult to accomplish” (8).

While the education budget in the NEH’s 1966 annual report – “Improvement of teaching and public understanding” -- is $782,000, by the fifth report in fiscal year 1970 the NEH is reporting just over $2.7 million in outright grants for education programs. The striking growth in congressional appropriations that built the NEH’s budget came primarily from funds earmarked to support teaching in the humanities. And that growth continued into the late 1970s. In a 2001 Chronicle column, Stanley Katz describes the NEH’s budget this way: “Originally financed with $5.9-million in fiscal year 1966, the N.E.H. saw its appropriations leap to $79.1-million in 1975 . . . with appropriations growing to $145.2-million in 1979.”

The first explicit call for proposals related to writing doesn’t appear until the 1977 NEH Division of Education Programs guidelines for proposals. It reads:

The Division looks for proposals in all disciplines of the humanities; and because certain deficiencies in humanistic study have recently become evident, is particularly interested in encouraging programs in foreign languages and in elementary and secondary education. In view of the growing national concern over the inadequacy of student
writing ability, the Endowment actively seeks proposals which address the improvement of expository writing within the context of humanities education. It is anticipated that most successful proposals – irrespective of subject matter – will be grounded in pedagogical approaches which rely heavily on written work by students. (3)

With this call, the NEH explicitly framed humanities education by how it could be linked to a narrative of literacy crisis. The funding boom for writing began in fact, as I combed through MLA conference programs from ’78 to ’84 I could see just how many panels related to writing could be traced in some way to NEH funded work. Composition, writing across the curriculum, and K-university writing initiatives had gained a powerful but uneasy presence at both the institutional and national level in English studies via enlarged writing program budgets and the new faculty and administrative positions that accompanied them. These were all funded as humanities education. While rhetoric had been long revered as a close cousin to the classics, composition – both as a subject of study and as pedagogy – had finally made it not just into the MLA and not just into English departments but also into the humanities.

The growth of the NEH from its 1965 founding also coincided with a shrinking academic job market in the humanities, so as the agency developed it was shaped by scholars who had imagined having academic careers in higher education and who had opinions about what they hoped the humanities could provide to faculty, students and the American public. Describing “very distinguished group of people” who made up the NEH staff of the mid-1970s, the writer Roger Rosenblatt, who was education director from ’73-’75, said “they created a university out of a foundation and that was a very nice
aspect of working there” (Rosenblatt). When I asked him to explain what he meant, he said:

In a foundation that deals with the humanities our conversations were about history, literature, philosophy, all the subjects that go into the humanities, so while we weren’t teaching students, we were dealing with the subjects of the humanities in ways that created a kind of university without students. (Rosenblatt)

In fact, the NEH participated in a Federal government-wide exchange program – the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA). NEH program officers went to institutions to teach and full-time faculty came to the NEH for a year or two (Ekman; Lesko). Former Modern Language Association President Sidonie Smith spent eighteen months at the NEH through the IPA program. As she described it:

They had a position in the Education Division. I started in January of ’81. And I worked on the large implementation grants . . . There were a whole set of writing across the curriculum projects and I remember making site visits to those. There were the large grants to develop interlocked courses in general education, humanities courses in general education. (Smith)

In the close quarters of the busy NEH offices new staff learned by listening in on other program officers’ conversations. Kathleen Lesko, a program officer, told me what she heard longer term staff saying in 1981 conflicted with what she was reading. “I was overhearing program officers telling prospective grantees and people calling in for information that we didn’t do writing anymore, and I was a little puzzled by that because I was seeing that we had funded all these wonderful writing projects, and I just felt that they didn’t have a sense of how invested
NEH had been in the writing projects” (Lesko). Lesko asked her supervisors at the NEH if she could look into the NEH’s record of funding writing. Without accounting for summer seminar funding, which, as I explained, was awarded through the NEH’s fellowship division, the internal report Lesko wrote accounts for just under 10 million in funding for writing in a ten year period from 1975 to 1985.

What is important to know is that by 1985, the NEH Division of Education Programs guidelines for submitting proposals were no longer inviting to writing directors. They read: “Although skills such as reading, writing, and speaking are essential to study of the humanities, Endowment support is usually not provided for courses that deal primarily with the development of these skills” (6).

I had often wondered if it was the great books focus of William Bennett, who became Chairman in December, 1981, that turned the NEH away from projects described as skills based and back to projects focused on the content of the humanities. As a field in search of the answer we, in writing studies, often cite Stephanie Almagno, who refers most specifically to the summer seminars in rhetoric and composition in her 1994 dissertation saying: “when questioned about the conspicuous disappearance of these support services, an NEH representative told me that The Endowment ran these events because few graduate programs in English granted extensive study in rhetoric and composition, and with the current proliferation of programs granting degrees in the area, the NEH sees no reason to duplicate this work (Couturier 1993)” (Almagno 103-104). Almagno continues: “This comment is ironic, however, in light of the fact that the NEH continues to fund programs in literature” (103-104).
Based on her internal report, Kathleen Lesko ended up deciding that the NEH: “had been convinced they had pretty much done it with writing. They’d launched it and it was up and running and it was self-sustaining” (Lesko). Was rhetoric and composition and writing self-sustaining in 1985? Is it now?

In the end, the most persuasive explanation for halting NEH funding for writing initiatives that I’ve heard, and the explanation that offers some insight to what happened at my previous institution, comes from Richard Ekman, who was Director of the NEH’s Education Division from 1982 to 1985. He told me:

A lot of these early 70’s grants were built on projects that were self-consciously experimental, outside the main structures of the institution and unfortunately when the external money stopped the projects dried up and one of my operating premises when I became director was that what the NEH ought to be doing was supporting things that had lasting value so the language of these new categories encouraged institutions to think of putting forward for funding the things that were already a high priority for them. (Ekman)

Ekman’s explanation – that something was fundable when it had lasting value and lived within expected institutionalized disciplinary structures – and his hint that writing was not really a high priority for institutions at a time when funding for writing was at its height – raise interesting questions about where and how writing continues to fit in to higher education disciplinarily.
I’m left thinking today about how we will choose to define writing within English studies and the humanities going forward? Millions of dollars of NEH funding might have gotten many on MLA programs, but panels like this one allow us to ask: In what ways has the lasting legacy of that funding really been an institutionalized place for writing in the humanities and in English?

Works Cited


Lesko, Kathleen. Personal Interview. 27 February 2012.


Smith, Sidonie. Personal Interview. 5 August 2014.