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STATE HUMANITIES COUNCILS AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS ON THE GREAT PLAINS

SARAH Z. ROSENBERG

This study covers the state humanities councils in the Great Plains for the four year period 1983-86. Biennial reports to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), upon which the study is based, are staggered for the convenience of NEH reviewers. As a result my data are either for 1983-84 or for 1985-86. I chose this time frame because by 1983 most state councils had been in existence for at least ten years and were past the years of experimentation and because the data available in these reports are presented consistently. I have included the ten Great Plains states—North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico—and three adjoining midwestern states—Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. While

this sample is, admittedly, small with respect to number of states and period of activities, it is nonetheless indicative of the means by which state councils have promoted and supported projects in the humanities sponsored by cultural and educational institutions. I have defined cultural institutions as museums, libraries, historical societies, and centers for the performing arts. The educational institutions are primarily those of higher education, colleges and universities. Radio, television, and film production facilities are also included in the study.

The impact of the state councils on the development of cultural institutions on the Great Plains can be quickly suggested by numbers. Table 1 shows that during a two-year period (1983-84 or 1985-86) the thirteen state councils funded a total of 1484 projects. About 44 percent of the grants went to educational institutions, 35 percent to cultural institutions, 5 percent to media projects, while the remaining 16 percent supported projects mounted through professional and occupational organizations such as labor, agriculture, law, and so forth.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 show the distribution by state for projects funded to the various types of institutions. Oklahoma ranks highest in the number of grants to cultural institutions (55.7

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TABLE 1.
DISTRIBUTION OF GRANTS FUNDED

	Number	Percentage
Total Awards	1484	100
a) Cultural Institutions	525	35
b) Higher Education	652	44
c) Media	71	5
Total (a,b,c)	1248	84
Awards to other organizations (labor, agriculture, legal etc.).	236	16

percent). Iowa leads in support for higher education projects (79.4 percent); and North Dakota surpasses the other states in awards to the media (18.6 percent). Since not all of these projects were related to the arts, I have, with the help of an NEH computer analyst, created Table 5 to show the number and value of arts projects as divided into three categories: 1. arts history, theory, and criticism; 2. folklore/folk-life; 3. arts/architecture. In the period 1983-1986, the thirteen state councils funded 369 projects in these areas, granting \$1,194,888 outright and generating \$6,489,282 in matching funds or in-kind contributions. The impact of the state humanities councils on the arts is significant in terms of both numbers of grants and dollars involved, but the figures do not tell the whole story.

Let us consider the kinds of projects that were supported by these funds and their impact upon the development of the sponsoring institutions. Public humanities projects benefit from visual or auditory components. An exhibition, a film, a theatrical performance, a dance, a concert, or any other kind of artistic rendition stimulates interest and adds excitement to public programs. Performing artists often work from texts or other take-off points for serious and persistent study. The act of viewing an exhibition, film, or play or of listening to a concert can be both ephemeral and passive. The interpretive experience begins when viewers and

listeners begin to ask questions and try to understand how and why the artist creates. State councils fund projects designed to stimulate interpretation in a variety of forms, including the following: lecture series; symposia; panel discussions; conferences; the preparation of catalogues, didactic labels, and interpretive panels for exhibitions; teacher and docent training; texts; and pre- and post-play discussions.

For example, state humanities councils have supported two very ambitious and successful music history projects, "Bach in Bozeman: From Musicology to Mathematics" and "Jazz: A History from Roots to Fusion." The Bozeman, Montana, conference commemorated the three hundredth birthday of Johann Sebastian Bach. Sponsored by the Bozeman Friends of Bach Society, "the conference explored the many ways that Bach's music has influenced an extraordinary range of humanistic disciplines from musicology to history, from religion to mathematics and computer science." Pulitzer Prize winner Douglas R. Hofstadter, author of *Godel, Escher, Bach*, and Dr. Karl Geiringer, one of the world's foremost authorities on Bach and his times, joined Montana scholars as speakers at the conference. The success of "Bach in Bozeman" has stimulated the Montana Council to begin planning a "Mozart in the Mountains" conference.¹

"Jazz: A History From Roots to Fusion," sponsored by a number of museums and arts centers in Colorado, traced the roots of jazz in

the African tradition, Black American folk music, blues, and ragtime to recent developments in jazz as classically influenced, avant-garde, an experimental art form. This project included a traveling exhibition; lectures by music historians, social historians, and anthropologists; and films such as the "Last of the Blue Devils."²

The Oklahoma council's penchant for funding cultural institutions appears in projects that run the gamut from exhibitions of Italian Renaissance sculpture, to paintings of American Impressionists (from the Phillips collection), to Western American Art (from the Thomas Gilcrease collection), to medieval art, to nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculpture (from the Hirshorn Museum), to Black American Art, to Japanese art of the seventeenth century. Similarly, the Minnesota council funded an exhibition of contemporary Chinese painting and of the work and life of Van Gogh.³

A two-day symposium held in conjunction with the Houston stop of a nationwide touring

exhibition of contemporary Hispanic-American art, funded by the Texas Council, featured the Mexican writer, philosopher, and diplomat Octavio Paz. Another three-day symposium supported by the Texas Council was held in conjunction with the opening in Austin of *Artistas Indigenas'* traveling exhibition of Native, Chicana, and Latina women's art. The Nebraska Committee supported a major symposium held in conjunction with the opening at Omaha's Joslyn Museum of "Views of the Vanishing Frontier," an exhibition based on the journals of nineteenth-century Prince Maximilian and the paintings by the Swiss artist Karl Bodmer, who accompanied Maximilian on a journey up the Missouri River.⁴

State councils have also supported exemplary projects in architectural history. The New Mexico council helped fund a symposium examining Robert Venturi's approach to design and architectural form. A video documentary supported by the Minnesota Council explored the William

TABLE 2.
NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS FUNDED BY STATE HUMANITIES COUNCILS TO CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

State	Cultural Institutions		Total Grants Funded	Biennial
	# Funded	% Total		
Colorado	20	37.0	54	1/85-12/86
Iowa	13	12.7	102	1/85-12/86
Kansas	39	37.9	103	1/83-12/84
Minnesota	30	36.6	82	1/85-12/86
Montana	24	19.7	122	1/83-12/84
Nebraska	83	44.4	187	1/85-12/86
New Mexico	17	29.3	58	1/85-12/86
North Dakota	28	32.2	86	1/83-12/84
Oklahoma	102	55.7	183	1/85-12/86
South Dakota	33	33.3	99	1/84-12/85
Texas	78	48.4	161	1/83-12/84
Wyoming	30	44.8	67	1/85-12/86
Wisconsin	58	32.2	180	1/83-12/84
Total	525	35.4	1484	

and Edna Purcell House in Minneapolis as an example of Prairie School architecture. The Nebraska Committee funded a lecture series on "Art and Architecture of the Nebraska State Capitol."⁵

Many states supported pre- and post-production discussions of plays, including the Guthrie Theatre's production of South African Athol Fugard's "Master Harold and the Boys" and Wyoming's "Shakespeare Live." North Dakota funded an exhibition of scenic and costume designs from Maxwell Anderson premiers, featuring the work of some of the most important American theatre designers from the 1920s to the 1950s.⁶

Folklife and folkart projects also received their share of support. Wyoming undertook the basic research to compile both a handbook and a videotape dealing with the state's folkways. Minnesota developed an exhibition on the folklore of fishing. In Colorado a humanist-in-residence worked with scholars in folklore, history, art history, and other related disciplines to pre-

pare a series of public programs exploring the ethnicity and tradition in Colorado folklife.⁷

What these diverse programs have in common tells us a good deal about the impact of state humanities councils on the development of cultural institutions on the Great Plains. First, the very diversity of the programs has enriched the lives of citizens who otherwise might not have had access to music history and theory, to art exhibitions and art and architectural history, to theatre productions and design, and to examinations of folklife. Second, program support from the state councils has strengthened cultural institutions by developing interpretive exhibitions, catalogues, brochures, films, and radio programs and by training docents for interpretive exhibitions. Third, the humanities programs have encouraged scholars to reach beyond the academy to out-of-school adults, engaging both in interpreting and preserving the art and material culture of humankind.

One example from Nebraska illustrates the impact and role of the state councils. When the

TABLE 3.
NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS FUNDED BY STATE HUMANITIES COUNCILS TO HIGHER EDUCATION*

State	Higher Education		Total Grants Funded	Biennial
	# Funded	% Total		
Colorado	20	37.0	54	1/85-12/86
Iowa	81	79.4	102	1/85-12/86
Kansas	51	49.5	103	1/83-12/84
Minnesota	33	40.2	82	1/85-12/86
Montana	71	58.2	122	1/83-12/84
Nebraska	64	34.2	187	1/85-12/86
New Mexico	33	56.9	58	1/85-12/86
North Dakota	37	43.0	86	1/83-12/84
Oklahoma	28	15.3	183	1/85-12/86
South Dakota	45	45.5	99	1/83-12/84
Texas	58	36.0	161	1/83-12/84
Wyoming	24	35.8	67	1/85-12/86
Wisconsin	107	59.4	180	1/83-12/84
Total	652	43.9	1484	

*Research or scholarly institution.

TABLE 4.
NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS FUNDED BY STATE HUMANITIES COUNCILS TO MEDIA *

State	Media Grants		Total Grants Funded	Biennial
	# Funded	% Total		
Colorado	9	16.7	54	1/85-12/86
Iowa	3	2.9	102	1/85-12/86
Kansas	8	7.8	103	1/83-12/84
Minnesota	2	2.4	82	1/85-12/86
Montana	4	3.3	122	1/83-12/84
Nebraska	7	3.7	187	1/85-12/86
New Mexico	3	5.2	58	1/85-12/86
North Dakota	16	18.6	86	1/83-12/84
Oklahoma	1	.5	183	1/85-12/86
South Dakota	3	3.0	99	1/83-12/84
Texas	11	6.8	161	1/83-12/84
Wyoming	2	3.0	67	1/85-12/86
Wisconsin	2	1.1	180	1/83-12/84
Total	71	4.8	1484	

*Radio, Television, Film

Nuckolls County Museum received a gift of Dakota Sioux artifacts from a long-time local resident, the volunteer director of the museum turned to the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities (NCH) for a planning grant. The small museum with its largely volunteer staff needed help in assessing the collection and determining how to meet the stipulation of the donor that the collection be exhibited in its entirety.

The NCH grant provided a stipend and travel expenses for a scholar from the University of Nebraska to visit the small south-central city of Superior to work with museum staff in developing a thematic approach to the exhibition design. The workers soon found that goods made in Taiwan were sprinkled among the valuable Dakota artifacts. The problem of how to exhibit the collection in its entirety was solved by building plexiglass exhibition cases with drawers at the bottom. School children could pull open the drawers and handle the less valuable material they housed. The museum then applied

for and received an implementation grant to build the furniture, produce the exhibition, publish a brochure, and provide training materials for docents. The exhibition enabled viewers to see how Indian-white cultural interaction had influenced the development of Indian art by tracing the evolution of traditional Indian design from precontact through the white trade period to the present renaissance of Indian culture.⁸

The Nuckolls County project proved to be a most successful way for the NCH to address the needs of small county museums in the state. NCH could provide the technical assistance and scholarly interpretation needed to keep the museums from becoming warehouses for objects accumulated and donated by local residents. With the help of a \$67,383 NEH Exemplary Award, the Nuckolls County success has been replicated by six more county museums—Phelps, Saunders, Cass, Webster, Dawson, and Lincoln. NCH made a significant contribution to

TABLE 5.
DISTRIBUTION OF GRANTS FUNDED BY THREE DISCIPLINES

Discipline	# Number	Amount	Matching
Arts history, criticism	292	\$1,034,875	\$5,805,940
Folklore/Folklife	58	116,212	541,028
Art/Architecture	19	43,801	142,314
Total	369	1,194,888	6,489,282

the educational role of the small, rural museums and was cited by NEH for the constructive cooperation it engendered between scholars and local museum personnel and for its long term beneficial effects on permanent exhibits.⁹

The work of state councils is not limited to generating competitive proposals such as those that funded the projects discussed above. In recent years councils have also developed and implemented special programs and projects such as Humanities Resource Centers that distribute media programs and summer institutes for teachers and scholars. Other councils have revived summer Chautauqua programs with scholars-in-residence. The small sample of projects I have presented, however, exemplifies some of the ways that state councils work with cultural and educational institutions on the grass roots level to provide state residents with opportunities to explore their cultural heritage. In my view, it has been a productive and effective partnership from which all have benefited and that will, I hope, continue to grow and change to assuage the hunger evidenced by citizens of the Plains for good public humanities programs.

NOTES

1. Montana Committee for the Humanities, 1983-84 *Biennial Proposal to the NEH*, 1 May 1985, p. 19.
2. Colorado Committee for the Humanities, NEH, Division of State Programs (DSP) Application Cover Sheets, 1985-86.
3. Oklahoma Foundation for the Humanities, NEH, DSP Application Cover Sheets, 1985-86; Minnesota Council for the Humanities, NEH, DSP Application Cover Sheets, 1983-84.
4. Texas Committee for the Humanities, NEH, DSP Application Cover Sheets, 1983-84; Nebraska Committee for the Humanities, NEH, DSP Application Cover Sheets, 1985-86.
5. New Mexico Council for the Humanities, NEH, DSP Application Cover Sheets, 1985-86; Minnesota Cover Sheets, 1983-84; Nebraska Cover Sheets, 1985-86.
6. Minnesota Committee for the Humanities, NEH, DSP Application Sheets, 1985-86, Wyoming Council for the Humanities, NEH, DSP Application Cover Sheets, 1985-86, and North Dakota Council for the Humanities, NEH, DSP Application Cover Sheets, 1983-84.
7. Wyoming, Minnesota, and Colorado DSP Application sheets.
8. Nebraska Committee for the Humanities, Interim Progress Report to the NEH, 15 June 1986.
9. NEH Review Letter, (10 July 1986).