

The Washington Times

Tax dollars wasted on humanities projects, critics charge

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It takes a lot of taxpayer dollars to subsidize a culture.

American taxpayers are spending tens of millions of dollars this year funding National Endowment for the Humanities grants that, among other things, finance research projects that look into the lives of pets during Victorian England, consider the history of black Americans in golf, study the culture of tea consumption in India and analyze the creation of ethnic identity in 18th century Ecuador.

During the 2014 fiscal year, the NEH funded those and hundreds of other grants at a cost to taxpayers of nearly \$56 million. Many of the 570 projects funded paid for with tax dollars, critics argue, are a poor use of public funds and are even downright silly.

Fiscal conservatives on Capitol Hill have taken notice, with bills introduced that would eliminate the agency entirely.

Agency defenders say the relatively small investment is a good use of the federal arts budget, one that spurs greater private investment in the humanities, supports overlooked research and leverages private investments. But the NEH grant list annually provides rich fodder for watchdogs of federal waste.

A professor at Baruch College, a branch of the City University of New York in Manhattan, scored a \$6,000 NEH grant to conduct a project titled "Pets and the Animal Protection Movement during the Victorian Age." Another \$6,000 stipend allowed a Central Michigan University historian to research stories of black American golfers.

Taxpayers also paid for a Syracuse University associate art professor to study the visual cultures of tea consumption in imperial and modern India.

Princeton University obtained more than \$37,000 from the NEH to look into anti-nuclear protest music in Fukushima, Japan, after the power plant disaster there. At the University of Southern California, a \$50,000 NEH grant funded researchers who investigated the role of alcohol in

Indian religion. Florida Atlantic University also pocketed \$50,000 to consider ethnic identity in 18th century Ecuador.

The National Endowment for the Humanities' litany of questionable spending has earned the agency the Golden Hammer Award. The dubious distinction is given weekly by The Washington Times to highlight waste and abuse of tax dollars.

The mission of the NEH, according to the bureaucracy's website, is to "advance knowledge and understanding in the humanities — history, philosophy, literature and languages, archaeology, jurisprudence, comparative religion, and other humanities subject areas — and make this knowledge and learning widely accessible throughout the nation."

But that mission, critics argue, could be performed just as well by philanthropists, foundations and privately funded nonprofit groups at no expense to taxpayers. Instead, federal taxpayers are stuck picking up the tab for the \$146 million annual NEH budget.

"The kinds of things financed by federal cultural agencies were produced long before those agencies were created, and they will continue to be produced long after those agencies are privatized or defunded," write Sheldon Richman and David Boaz in the Cato Institute's "Handbook for Policymakers."

Millions for overhead

More than \$42.5 million in public money annually goes to fund the NEH's overhead costs. Much of the remaining money goes to state and local humanities projects, as well as the hundreds of grants to fund trips, courses, research projects, stipends and other giveaways.

The NEH did not make anyone available for comment. Bro Adams, chairman of the NEH, defended the agency recently, arguing that NEH "plays an enormously important role in the civic and cultural life of the country,"

Butler University in Indianapolis received almost \$22,000 for a class that "explores the diverse functions of comedy." Another \$22,000 went to underwrite the development of a new freshman-level course at the University of Central Arkansas about the pursuit of self-knowledge.

Those are two of 20 examples of "Enduring Questions" grants currently funded with as much as \$38,000 so colleges can invent new classes to cram into college catalogs.

One of the NEH's most controversial recent projects, a 2013 grant to Boston's Suffolk University to allow first-year students to contemplate the meaning of life, was also funded with a \$25,000 "Enduring Questions" grant. After that grant became public, Sen. Jeff Sessions, Alabama Republican, wrote a letter to the agency, questioning the "appropriateness" of many NEH grants "in the current fiscal environment."

Mr. Adams, in response, said, "I am convinced that this kind of study is not merely defensible but critical to our national welfare."

A year after Mr. Sessions brought to light issues surrounding NEH spending, little has changed. This fiscal year, the agency is budgeted to spend just as much as it did last year.

Additional examples of grants funded this year through the agency include: \$50,000 to George Mason University so faculty members can bone up on the transnational history of Argentine popular music in the 20th century; \$38,000 to Penn State to learn about polar exploration and Anglo-American print culture between 1818-1914; \$6,000 to Northern Arizona University for a project about magic and medicine in 18th century Yucatan; \$6,000 to Arkansas State University to research the aesthetics of pocket maps in Renaissance Britain; and \$6,000 to Loyola University in Maryland to study modernist women's poetry and "the problem of sentimentality."

American taxpayers even funded several grants that were given to researchers outside of the United States to study non-American projects, including \$50,000 to a Canadian scholar to explore the concept of the "uncanny" in 20th Century Austrian-German thought, and another \$50,000 to a professor in Ireland to analyze the meaning and importance of novelty in 14th century European music.

Efforts to shut down the Endowment show no signs of stopping in Congress. In July, Rep. Matt Salmon introduced yet another bill prohibiting federal tax dollars from funding the NEH.

"In light of our astronomical debt, burdening the U.S. with these thoughtless [NEH] projects is insulting," said the Arizona Republican. "Just one of these programs is outrageous enough, but to think that we have spent hundreds of millions of dollars supporting projects most Americans would find frivolous at best is offensive."

Mr. Salmon invited the agency to continue its work as a privately funded nonprofit rather than a taxpayer-funded agency.

If public funding to the agency ended, Mr. Salmon remarked, the NEH would be "free to pursue private funding for any programs it wishes."