

Humanities on the Hill Briefing **“Delivering the Message”**

I have given myself a two-fold task—to remind you of some ways to give your visits to your members of Congress more punch and staying power, and more important, to talk about the extremely important message we all have to deliver.

Many of you have done this now for many years. Some of you find it exhilarating, and we love that about you; some of you don't, and we don't hold that against you; but I assume, because you are here, that you all find it important. It is. And the reason is that if members of Congress don't hear from us how valuable our work is, where are they going to hear it? You are here because anything that John or Carolyn or I say to members of Congress every day of the week will mean nothing if you can't tell them what difference you are making in their own districts. We're here together because the collective voice is more powerful and more persuasive than individual voices are.

Here are some things to remember about these visits, and even for those of you who do this year after year, it's probably worth saying out loud. You visit these offices because you are experts about a particular area of work going on in your state that your member of Congress needs to know about. Make yourself not just a supplicant but a source of valuable and even essential information.

Play on the interests and concerns of each member. Find the issues they care about and show the positive contribution you make in relation to that issue. Be concise and specific. Remember that whether you are seeing the actual member of Congress or the aide, you are one of dozens of people much like you that they are seeing in the course of the day. Make it worth their time, and make it as memorable for them as possible.

Establish a relationship with the staff person responsible for the humanities in the office. They are potentially your best allies in getting your issue in front of their bosses. Find the point of common interest there. Exchange cards. Above all, don't neglect the follow-up, the sooner the better. Thank the people you saw for taking the time to talk with you, reiterate your request, add information about your programs, expand on points that may have arisen unexpectedly in your meeting. The Federation website offers some sample follow-up letters that can be easily adapted.

That is a very quick runthrough of the how of these office visits. The really good news, though, is that these visits are really about the what, and that is our very strong point, especially now.

First let me say, since the economy is so much on our minds, that although this is by no means, in my view, our most important message, we in fact are about the economy. It is definitely worth reminding your members that the money that Congress allocates to the state humanities councils gets to the organizations and citizens of their communities more quickly and does more good work, dollar for dollar, than most of the federal programs you can name. Further, at a time when state governments are cutting so many programs, the federal funding that councils channel into local communities for libraries, museums, and other cultural, educational, and social service agencies is a tremendous boost—and would be more tremendous if there were more of it. Count up the cultural and educational programs that you know are being cut in your states, think about council programs that could help fill the gap, and you will already have itemized needs far beyond the \$25 million that we are requesting this year. How many additional family reading programs, teacher institutes and online resources, museum or library programs could your council carry out, how many more grants could you award to small organizations, and how much would they ease the pain being felt around the state?

But the real strength of our message is not economic, as many of you have pointed out over these past months, and we fight a losing battle if we claim our economic impact as our primary strength or even claim to be important players in that realm. The humanities, and your humanities programs, are important because of what they contribute to the public good at all times, and at times of crisis, in particular—whatever that crisis might be. The New York Times article that has been so much discussed in recent days quotes one scholar who describes the “central and sacred mission” of the humanities to be the exploration of “what it means to be a human being.” Well, yes. That’s not a particularly new or startling description. And in fact, if you want to adopt that description at all, then I would say that the state humanities councils programs help citizens explore not just what it means to be a human being but what it means to a thinking, learning, engaged human being, seeking better ways for human beings to live in relationship to one another in pursuit of a better public life. Your programs certainly transform lives, as our tag line says, but equally important, they transform groups and communities and whole societies.

There is no lesson more powerful than the disruption of our economy to show us that economics cannot serve as the sole basis of a meaningful life or a fully healthy society, and couldn't, even when the economy was flourishing. Many of you saw the provocative article by Australian John Armstrong that Kristina Valaitis posted to the directors list a few weeks ago, arguing that the "The long-term health of the economy depends on the flourishing of the humanities," because (and I ask your indulgence here for simplification) for citizens to appropriately handle the freedom made possible by a capitalist society, they must cultivate maturity and wisdom. This maturity and wisdom comes in large part from, in his words, "understanding the collective human condition, learning from the experiences of others, piecing together our ideas about life, testing them against experience, and sorting through their internal tensions." We further cultivate maturity by thinking critically, by acquainting ourselves with other viewpoints, other cultures, and, to paraphrase Armstrong, by extending our range of acquaintance across time and space, by understanding how to connect experience, action, and reflection. State humanities councils have long promoted this kind of maturity. Clearly, at present, we are not alone in believing this is vital to the country. Were we not reminded on Inauguration Day by our new President that it was time to put away childish things?

These are probably notions that require a bit more leisure than you will have when talking to your members of Congress or their aides. But they can be the underpinning of the practical benefits you are able to offer up as our contribution to the public good at this particular time. The practical benefits are many. Your programs make it possible for families, especially at-risk, low-income families, to come together to read and discuss ideas. What better way to ensure the awareness and maturity of the emerging citizens of those families? Your programs help new citizens understand their new home, and help their neighbors understand these new neighbors by understanding the cultures that shaped them. Your programs help teenagers and young adults examine their own experiences through stories and electronic media and imagine the world they would like to help shape. Your programs bring together people of differing viewpoints on issues that are of vital importance to the health and survival of their communities and help them reconcile these differences. Your programs help citizens talk in disciplined and productive ways about religion, immigration, energy, schools and children, the environment.

All these activities boost our chances of having not only more mature citizens but a more mature society. This is what state humanities councils have to offer. What better value could Congress possibly ask?