In the United States, funding and other support for the humanities comes from numerous and varied sources. Prominent among these are universities, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Mellon Foundation. But there are a host of other sources helping to support humanists’ work in various ways.

**Universities**

Universities are undoubtedly the core supporters of humanities work. They provide humanists with salaried jobs, benefits, sabbatical time, and financial support for research, office space, and equipment. They also offer access to humanities resources gathered in libraries, museums, and/or humanities centers, and create communities of humanist scholars who work with and learn from each other. Perhaps most importantly, universities educate the next generation of humanists, giving younger scholars the knowledge and the connections with established scholars that will make their future work possible.

University funding comes primarily from endowments, tuition, alumni donations, and other private and/or corporate donors, with varying levels of state and/or federal funding. Funding for specific research performed at universities may come from the NEH, private foundations, disciplinary organizations, and/or independent humanities organizations such as the ACLS. Often, even when a scholar’s project receives outside funding, the university with which the scholar is affiliated provides some form of support, at least in the form of sabbatical time and/or access to resources and office space. As John D’Arms stated in a 1997 paper, despite declines in outside humanities funding, “[u]niversities have remained willing to carry the costs of staff benefits during periods of leave and to ‘top up’ fellowships...” Thus, an official at a fellowship-granting organization commented that private organizations (like his own) ought to attempt to keep fellowships high, so as to reduce the burden on universities. Unfortunately, a combination of reduced federal funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities and reduced support from private foundations has forced universities to pick up a greater portion of the burden of humanities support.

Related to this issue is a question brought up by an official at a large funding organization. He comments that foundations complain that the humanities “plead poverty” but, in the foundations’ view, are funded by “hidden subsidies” from universities, including such things as libraries that primarily benefit humanities scholars, and scholarships that in large part go to humanities and liberal arts scholars.

**The National Endowment for the Humanities**

The National Endowment for the Humanities is a key supporter of the humanities and is the main vehicle for federal humanities support. Its budget comes primarily from the federal government, though it gets some money from private donors. The NEH supports projects across the humanities spectrum, from faculty fellowships to public cultural events, unlike many private foundations and private centers that support only work that coincides with their general mission and/or interests. The NEH supports both individuals and organizations. It is the largest provider of faculty fellowships, and these fellowships are portable. The faculty member receiving the fellowship is not restricted to working in a particular location or for a particular organization, as is the case with grants from many other organizations. Some NEH grants require the recipient to raise matching dollars; Challenge Grants require $3 or $4 in matching dollars for each federal dollar. The NEH is also the primary supporter of the state humanities councils.

Over the years, the combined impact of budget cuts and inflation has reduced the number, diversity, and buying power of NEH grants. In 1996, Congress cut funding for the agency by 36 percent, lowering its budget from $172 million to $110 million. Sixty percent of
the cuts were made to education and research programs. State humanities councils received a larger portion of the NEH budget primarily because of their influence in Congress. Each state and territory has its own humanities council, and since the state councils produce primarily public-oriented, popular projects, they appeal to congressional constituents and thus to representatives and senators. John D’Arms noted that “state programs are expected to remain immune from [budget] cuts, since congressional appreciation for the work of the state councils is viewed by many as the strongest bulwark protecting the Endowment from extinction.”

Another issue of concern in recent years has been the shift toward short-term projects at the expense of long-term projects. In December 2000, NEH proposed a policy to give priority to scholarly projects with a specific timetable. Scholars maintained that such moves would hinder projects that are, for example, doing long-term work on the collected papers of historical figures such as Mark Twain or Thomas Jefferson, or work on important ancient-language reference works.

Private Foundations

Private foundations, especially the Mellon Foundation, are strong supporters of humanities research and to some extent have helped make up for National Endowment for the Humanities budget cuts. The Mellon Foundation deserves special mention; it is “head and shoulders above the other foundations” in funding humanities work, according to one humanities advocate. John D’Arms estimated in 1997 that the Mellon Foundation granted about 50 to 60 percent of the $50 million granted by all foundations towards humanities work. Most foundations are primarily supported through endowments left by their founders, but they may receive some money from the NEH, other foundations, or private donors.

Foundations vary greatly in terms of what work they will fund. Most have missions and agendas of their own and fund work that agrees with those agendas. Mellon is one of the few foundations specifically dedicated to basic humanities scholarship. Some foundations will consider unsolicited proposals; some, like the Rockefeller Foundation, prefer to seek out grantees themselves. Some, like Mellon and The Pew Charitable Trusts, will only fund organizations and institutions; some, like the Guggenheim Foundation, support only individuals.

An official at a humanities advocacy organization praised foundations for their flexibility and their ability to move quickly. She commented that “people [at foundations] have big ideas and make them happen.” While she was “very glad” about NEH’s central role in American humanities, she was “absolutely dazzled” by what foundations can do. Interesting projects currently being funded by major foundations include the Woodrow Wilson Foundation’s Humanities At Work project, designed to help academic humanists use their talents and training in community-based work while helping new PhDs to find jobs (frequently outside the traditional academic career path). The Woodrow Wilson Foundation also runs the only national postdoctoral fellowship program for the humanities, in partnership with twenty-two universities. The Mellon Foundation, among numerous other activities, helped to fund JSTOR, now a private organization dedicated to using information technology to improve scholarly communication.

On the other hand, John D’Arms worried that many foundations are focusing their grants on the arts and abandoning humanities fellowships. “Of the three major foundations that had anchored the core fellowship programs [in the 1980s], only the Mellon has maintained its record of substantial grantmaking into the 1990s...[n]or have other large foundations stepped forward to take their places.” D’Arms pointed out that the universities and colleges have taken up a large part of the slack in providing and supplementing fellowships. An official at an independent humanities organization is more reassuring, saying that now that the “culture wars” are largely over, foundations seem more willing to fund humanities projects again. Still, he worries that when endowments do badly in the market, foundations may have a more difficult time making grants. He also points out that foundations are becoming more mission-driven. It may be more difficult for humanists to get grants if their work does not fit closely with a foundation’s mission.
University Humanities Centers

University-based humanities centers are frequently well funded, in part because of their connections to universities and their appeal for private donors. They vary greatly in size from university to university. They often foster interdisciplinary work and allow university faculty to pursue such collaborations. They provide fellowships for graduate students, and fellowships and sabbaticals for faculty. They fund research and teaching, and sponsor exhibits, lectures, and courses for credit and/or continuing education classes. Stanford University’s humanities center, for example, offers graduate workshops funded by the Mellon Foundation that bring several faculty members and advanced graduate students together to explore topics of interest and discuss works in progress. The goals are to encourage faculty members to pursue new, frequently interdisciplinary areas of study while engaging graduate students in continuing scholarly conversations. One official at a prominent humanities organization referred to the growth of university-based centers as a very positive development, one that should be encouraged and that AAU universities should encourage.

Independent Humanities Centers

Independent humanities centers are similar in nature, but unaffiliated with universities. They are primarily supported by foundations, private and corporate donors, and sometimes by the NEH. They provide fellowships to faculty members and to some graduate students and/or new PhDs. Most, like the National Humanities Center, offer fellowships to bring scholars to their centers to study, thus providing them with access to resources and to a community of other scholars. They also promote other programs to aid the humanities. For example, the NHC provides summer programs for faculty in liberal arts and other colleges. It has also developed innovative programs that make efficient use of faculty time to strengthen teaching in the schools, especially in response to new state-based standards for instruction in history and other fields. The Center for Arts and Culture has launched the Cultural Commons, “an online space for networking, information exchange, community building, and issue identification in cultural policy” at http://www.culturalpolicy.org/issuepages/infolayout.cfm?page=Commons.

The Social Sciences Research Center should also be mentioned. Although, as the name implies, it focuses on the social sciences, its interests frequently overlap with the humanities. The organization was originally founded by a group of social science disciplinary associations to help with research, funding, and publications. It now funds fellowships and maintains projects and committees in various areas of the social sciences.

Independent Research Libraries

Independent research libraries, such as the Huntington Library, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Newberry Library in Chicago, and even the New York Public Library, also provide important support to the humanities. One official at a funding organization referred to them as “freestanding mini-universities.” These are important primarily because of the valuable resources that they gather together, but also because of the fellowships, lectures, and exhibits that they support. Their collections frequently include invaluable primary sources, and they help to preserve some of the most vital humanities-related documents in the world. They are frequently funded by private endowments, with help from private and corporate donors and foundations.

These independent research libraries, like humanities centers, often fund fellowships to bring scholars to their collections. For example, the Folger offers two sets of fellowships — two funded in part by the Mellon Foundation, with stipends of $30,000 and $45,000, and three funded by the NEH, with maximum stipends of $30,000 — plus numerous short-term fellowships. The Huntington offers over 100 fellowships per year, with a range of stipends and a variety of funding sources. Most also host conferences, lectures, and exhibitions, and in the Folger’s case, plays.

The Library of Congress

The Library of Congress, funded primarily by the federal government, has a special role in the matter of preservation and access. The Library of Congress, funded primarily by the federal government, has a special role in the matter of preservation and access. It is unique in that it tries to collect works in every possible area. It also collects works in every format, unlike many libraries that are still far more comfortable with print. It exists primarily to serve Congress but is also an incomparable resource for the ordinary citizen. Its special collections
are immensely valuable and far more comprehensive than can be found almost anywhere else.

The Library of Congress is currently participating in a public-private partnership to create a National Digital Library, designed to make the core of the library’s collection widely accessible over the Internet. The “American Memory” section of that project, for example, has about 7.5 million digital items online in text, pictures, and sound, all of which focus on American history and culture. Another focus is the “Meeting of the Frontiers” project, a collaboration between the Library of Congress and Russian libraries, involving the history and culture of Russia, Siberia, and the American West, and their interactions with each other. Just beginning is a similar project titled “American Memory/Dutch Memory” in collaboration with the Royal Library in the Netherlands. Also, with numerous other federal agencies (including the National Archives), the Library of Congress is working on the National Digital Information Infrastructure Preservation Program, designed to preserve digital materials (e.g., Web sites, databases, television, and radio programs).

The Library of Congress also offers fellowships, including one program in partnership with the Mellon and Luce Foundations, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the AAU, to bring ten junior scholars to the library to use the area-studies special collections (three must be studying in the East Asian collection). There are eight endowed chairs for senior scholars (five of which also include positions for two junior scholars each).

It should also be mentioned that the Library of Congress includes the National Copyright Office, of immense value both to humanists seeking materials published but not yet in the library’s collections, and to humanists seeking to publish their own work.

State Humanities Councils

State humanities councils, discussed above in relation to the NEH, are an important factor in linking humanities work to the surrounding community. There is a state humanities council for every state and territory in the United States. These councils receive their primary funding from the NEH. Other donors include foundations, private and corporate donors, and, in some cases, the states. State funding varies widely. Connecticut, Minnesota, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maine, Pennsylvania, and Virginia have all been successful in getting significant state funding, while many Western state councils struggle. Arizona, for example, gets little state funding despite making what one humanities advocate called a “very effective” case for cultural heritage and tourism. Since state humanities councils, unlike state arts councils, are not state agencies, they tend to receive far less money from the state than arts councils do.

State humanities councils only fund work that is publicly accessible. Typical projects include state cultural heritage projects, oral history projects, and speakers’ bureaus (which provide communities with lists of scholars available to give public lectures; the community then applies for a stipend to bring a scholar to the community). What projects are funded depends very much on the particular state council. Some initiate projects, some fund proposals submitted to them, and some do both. Most have an interest in Web-based projects. Texas, for example, has online interactive exhibits on several topics, including chivalry and knighthood, Texas culture, the ancient world, and studies of people living on American borders. Many are encouraging cultural heritage projects in order to draw tourism to the state, thus increasing their value in the eyes of state legislators and governors.

Disciplinary Associations and the ACLS

Disciplinary associations, such as the American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association, support the humanities primarily by serving as a focus for community. Disciplinary associations generally support one or more scholarly journals; arrange for conventions and scholarly meetings; serve as political advocates for their field; and award grants, fellowships, and recognition awards to outstanding scholars. They are funded by dues and generally dedicated to the promotion of one field or subfield.

The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), whose funding comes primarily from an endowment and from several foundations, including the Mellon Foundation, is a federation of sixty-four national scholarly associations. It provides fellowships and grants to humanities scholars at various stages in their
careers. It funds a wide variety of humanities scholarship, and fosters programs in international and area studies. It has sponsored and continues to sponsor discussions and programs on numerous vital topics in the humanities, including scholarly publication, the use of computing technology in the humanities, curricular development and teacher education, the future of research libraries, and many more.

Museums

Museums support the humanities by making resources available to scholars and to the public, and by funding humanities research. Museums range from the giant, federally funded, and privately endowed Smithsonian Institution to small house museums funded primarily through admission fees and private donors.

Private Donors

Private donors are themselves crucial supporters of the humanities. They are quite hard to track, of course, since they vary widely in funds, interests, and projects supported, and some donate anonymously. Still, they should not be overlooked. Wealthy private donors endowed most foundations, many universities, and some museums (including the Smithsonian itself) and libraries. Even donors of average income regularly help to maintain the annual funds and/or the humanities centers at their alma maters, or help support their local museums and libraries through donations and memberships.

Endnotes

2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.