

PREPARING A SUCCESSFUL NEH APPLICATION

Summary of a Conference Call with Program Officer Mark Silver of the NEH – Sept. 2010

(Accompanying Powerpoint Presentation Available from Tess)

Funding Rates for Fiscal Year 2010

Fellowships (up to \$50,400) - 116 funded out of 1,285 applications, 9 percent.

Summer Stipends (\$6,000) - 85 funded out of 1,014 applications, 8 percent.

Teaching Development (up to \$25,000) - 17 funded out of 151 applications, 11 percent.

Summary Overview of Review Process

- First phase of review: peer review panel. “the most important step”
- NEH staff’s judgment of the application. “We rely very heavily upon peer review panel recommendations, but they are not the final word. ... We try to find a uniform level of quality across those panels. We compile a list of recommended applications.
- Recommendations sent to National Council on the Humanities (26 citizens, presidential appointees)
- A subcommittee of Council makes recommendations to the chairman of the NEH, who makes the final decision by law

“The take-home lesson I think ... is that many different people read your application. ... Most of these people have Ph.D.s in the humanities it’s fair to say, but many of them will be outside of your field. So it’s absolutely essential that your application communicate to these people and that it also satisfy the specialists who are in or close to your field, most likely on that peer review panel. *So, this requires I think a very strategic simplification in your writing. You need to boil your project down to its essence. You need to keep clear in your own mind the difference between the essence and the supporting details and I would say emphasize the essence, but include details - properly subordinated details.*”

The Review Process in Greater Detail

Grouping the Proposals - “The first element of this review is that we group applications by field when they come in. That is to say by some combination of discipline, geographic area and historical period. As I said, we ran 36 panels in the fellowships competition this summer. ... There was a panel on early modern European history. One called African studies. We had a political science and jurisprudence panel, south and southeast Asian studies, musicology In American literature we ran two panels. American history, three panels. This sorting into groups by field is based primarily on the cover sheet for the application where you identify your expertise and what you provide us in the abstract. Although we will go more deeply into an application if it looks like it might be tricky to categorize for some reason.”

Reading by Panels - Summer Stipends (4-member panel) and Fellowships (5-member panel).

“Summer stipend panelists [do their work online and] do not communicate with each other... [therefore] those are the ratings that stand for subsequent phases of review. Fellowships panels do [communicate with each other]. We bring the [Fellowship] panelists here to Washington, D.C. We put them in a room and they talk to each other before settling on their final ratings for an application.

So in that case if you could win over say two out of five panelists, there is some possibility that those two might become advocates for your application and explain to the others and persuade them to raise their ratings, but with summer stipends there’s no communication among the panelists ... so you really have to win all of the panelists over really right off the bat. ... *Each of these panels will rate about 30 to 40 applications and probably spend about 30 minutes per proposal on average.* So you can do the math. ... That means on average ... *three applications out of the pile will be*

recommended. So to be successful your application has to stand out in that pool and it has to win over all or nearly all of the panelists and it will have to make a strong impression on the first reading because there may not be a second reading.”

Evaluation Criteria

“I use an unofficial alliterative mnemonic to remember these five points and I’ll share that with you, emphasizing that it is unofficial. It’s all P’s; Project, Person, Proposal, Plan and Probability (that is, of successful completion). ... Let me say that we’re very strict about adhering to these criteria. One of my jobs as a panel chair in fact is to make sure that panelists don’t introduce other criteria into their deliberations.”

#1 – “The first is the **intellectual significance** of the proposed project including its value to humanity scholars, general audiences or both. ... We think of this around here as first among equals in terms of the criteria. We really want to see a strong case made in the application for the project’s intellectual significance.”

#2 – “Second, the **quality or promise of quality** of the applicant’s work as an interpreter of the humanities. I have two things I think to say about this criterion. The first is that there is a sort of *built-in attempt here to level the playing field between junior scholars and senior scholars*. If we’re evaluating a proposal from a senior scholar we want to see a clear track record of quality. If the person is more junior, promise of quality is good enough. ... Our actual funding rate I think is about one-third junior faculty members and two-thirds senior faculty members in the fellowships programs. [If you are more than 7 years from receiving PhD, you are “senior.”] ... The second thing I’d like to say about this criterion is that this is where we really ask ourselves the question *Is the applicant the right person to do this project?* Often one thing that makes strong applications strong is that they show that very clearly, particularly in the way the project is building on previous work that a scholar has done.

#3 – “The third criterion is the **quality of the conception, definition, organization and description of the project** and the applicant’s **clarity of expression**. We want to see a clear conception and design and we want to see a good application. Here what I invite panelists to do is to really *consider the application itself as a document that represents what the applicant is capable of producing*.

[Toward this end, proposals should be well organized. If the panel is discussing the work plan, they like to be able to find it quickly. “Panelists feel more comfortable if they can point to a single paragraph that contains a clear explanation of the entire work plan. ... The same would be true for any other part of the application. I think *panelists like to see a clearly stated argument for intellectual significance* as well, even though of course the entire application in a way is or should be speaking to that point, but if you can provide a sense that there is a paragraph that one can point to that explains what the significance of the project is I think that will help your chances.” *This is where a good use of headings comes into play. Use those headings well to help guide the reviewer through the reading and help the reviewer find key information that addresses the eval. criteria.*]

#4 – “Fourth, the feasibility of the **proposed plan of work** including, when appropriate, the soundness of the dissemination and access plans. *The plan of work is extremely important*. We are a taxpayer funded agency and we instruct all of our panelists that they are part of a public trust and that it must be clear to them what an applicant is going to do with the taxpayer’s dollars. So the work plan is not optional in any sense. ... It should be reasonable as opposed to wildly optimistic. Work plans that raise doubts about their feasibility may well result in a downgrading of the application.”

#5 – “The last criterion is the likelihood that the applicant will **complete the project**. The important thing here is that the panel be convinced that you will ultimately finish the project. ... If you’re proposing a book you need not complete that entire book during the award period. You must convince the panel that you will ultimately bring it to completion.”

Some Specific Tips for Writing NEH Applications

- “Remember the **multi-specialty composition** of the panel, especially for summer stipends. Be certain that you’re writing for people who are not in your immediate field.”
- “**Jargon** ... raises doubts in their mind about how wide a readership your book will have. So clear, accessible writing counts for a lot in my experience.”
- “Remember the time constraints of the panelists. ... Panelists are reading a lot of applications. They are conscientious, but I would say **use your space well** on the page. So use headings, bullet points, think about how you’re using white space to strategically guide the eye over the page and help panelists absorb the most important information quickly.”
- “Remember the intensity of the competition ... the best applications are very polished and they’ve gone through **many drafts**.”
- “Take advantage of **sample applications** that we have available on the website. The guidelines for each of our competitions include five or six winning applications that are available for you to download. You may also request additional applications from our list of funded projects. We limit those requests to two additional applications for fellowships and one additional application for .. the summer stipends competition.”
- “**Explicitly address the four areas** listed in the instructions [research and contribution; methods and work plan; competencies, skills and access; final product and dissemination]. ...In a competition this intense it is possible that your application could be marked down for a failure to address one of them clearly.
- “Make the **abstract** clear, convincing and somehow surprising.... You should try to explain in a sentence or two why what you’re doing matters and why it’s significant and often there is some element of surprise in that. In other words, up until now we’ve thought thus and so in this field. I’m going to show that something different is the case. So you want to make the reader turn the page and dive into the application. ... [The abstract] of course is the first part of the application that your panelists see and first impressions can count for a lot.”
- “Show that your arguments are **well developed**. Include ‘follow through’ phrases and sentences, especially in chapter outlines. Here I do have an example of what I’m talking about. [See Slides 11 and 12 of the Powerpoint presentation]
- “Try to use words and phrases that **telegraph significance**. I’ve told you already that intellectual significance is a top criterion of judgment. Try to capitalize on that. ... Think about how to express what your project is doing. Are you forcing reappraisal of some kind? Are you overturning our understanding of something? Are you adding new perspective? *Think very carefully about what phrase or phrases you’d like to use to describe just what it is that you’re doing, but don’t oversell here.* Panelists also tend not to like a sense that there’s hype somehow in a proposal.”
- “**Draft early and get comments**. You need to start the process early and I would say ask for comments from many people, not just a few. Try to ask for comments from people who are inside and outside of your own area. ...If you’re thinking about who you ask for comments you may be able to come rather close to duplicating the review process and the reading of your application by people who have many different specialties.”

- “Discuss your application with your **letter writers**. The very best letters are the ones that show a high level of intellectual engagement with the substance of the proposed project. ...I’ve read quite a lot of letters that show a sort of enthusiasm for the candidate in general and for the previous work of the candidate, but when it comes down to it are thin on the question of the significance of the proposed project. So I recommend that you get comments from your letter writers if you can. For one thing that forces engagement from busy people. *And absolutely show your letter writers your finished application. Don’t merely describe what you’re doing in an e-mail or a phone conversation because this really will show in the letters.*”
- “If a letter really shows the kind of intellectual engagement with the substance of the project that I was talking about, that if that **letter is able to restate its significance** in slightly different terms than the applicant himself or herself has used and yet not overshadow the applicant --- that is, do a better job of explaining the significance than the applicant has -- then this I think will improve the changes of an application.”
- Take special care in how you frame what you are doing in **relation to other scholars**.
- “For **dissertation revision**, take special care with the work plan. I’ve seen several projects flounder here because it wasn’t clear to the panelists what the applicant was doing beyond some reorganizing and rewriting and maybe adding a new introduction to the project. So I would consider if you’re doing a dissertation revision that you make a new case for a chapter that you’re adding or something that will require some more work in the archives or interviews or something along those lines that will convince panelists you’re not spending a year dotting your I’s and crossing your T’s.”
- “If there’s something unusual in your **career trajectory** you might consider asking a letter writer to address it or put it in context. Think about how best to use all of the different parts of the application to work for you.”
- “Your **bibliography** is just as important as the other parts of the application. Panelists do look at it. They consider it a snapshot of your knowledge and of the intellectual company in which you’re working. It’s an important indicator to them of what you know and what you’re doing. ...I have seen projects suffer downgrades during discussion because of gaps in the bibliography that one panelist will point out to the others and this will raise doubts in their minds and in some cases rather fundamental ones about how well you will be able to position your project in relation to existing scholarship”.
- “One can include an **appendix** and if you have visual materials. It takes just a moment to look at a page of images, but it will stick in panelists’ minds as well.”
- “Think of all the parts of the application in forming a **unified argument** for funding you. The parts should all complement one another. So, your letter writers shouldn’t seem to misunderstand the project. Your CV should show excellent preparation for what you propose and a steadiness of scholarly output. All the pieces should fit together.”
- “Someone who’s **working in the social sciences** with humanistic element in their scholarship certainly should consider applying. ...As far as technical eligibility goes, we tend to throw things into the pool and see what the panelists make of them. Allow them to make decisions about whether something fits into the humanities or not rather than to rule things out before we get an opinion from the panelists.”

Other Tips (not specifically related to writing the application)

- “First, ask for your **comments**. Whether you get a grant or not you’ll have the opportunity to request comments from the panelists and we supply them to you essentially verbatim. Don’t neglect to ask for your comments. ... This really is one of the great, great services of NEH. We give out money, but we also give out comments and often these can reshape projects in very significant ways and even reshape entire careers. Many panelists are extremely conscientious about writing good, thorough, constructive comments.”
- “Second, **reapply** if you’re rejected. Try again. Unless you mention in your application that you’re reapplying, the panelists will not know that.”
- “Sign up to **serve as a panelist**. You can do this on our website. If you follow the Apply for a Grant link you’ll see a place to submit your name as a perspective panelist. Of course not everyone who signs up gets an invitation, but if you are invited to serve, this will give you the chance to read applications in your field and give you a sense of what the competition is like.”
- “Another option would be to **read applications for your own institution**. You know probably that summer stipend applicants must be nominated by their home institutions. You could try to get on the committee that reads those applications and make nominations. That would be another way to see a lot of applications.”
- Regarding requesting funded applications: “You can **search all of the successful applications** by keyword, by the institution at which they originated, by the name of the applicant and so forth and compile your own statistics or get your own names of successful applicants who might be resources on your local campuses.”
- “There’s absolutely no reason to be reluctant [to **contact a program officer**]. Here’s my contact information.

Mark Silver
NEH Division of Research
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Room 318
Washington, DC 20506
msilver@neh.gov
202-606-8624
Or: research@neh.gov / 202-606-8200

We welcome inquiries and there’s really no reason to be shy about it. You can call me out of the blue [without an email first]. I think all of us feel the same way. ... I have the feeling sometimes when I’m talking to a would-be applicant that they sort of feel that I personally am going to have a major say in the outcome on their application. I do have some input, but really it’s the panelists that have the most sway in this process and we take calls all the time. We welcome them.”

- The last point here, success is usually the result of several years of strategic career building and networking.

More on the Creation of the NEH Panels

“How do we put these panels together and who are the panelists? The very first consideration is that we want real experts to review the applications. So we look for panelists who have strong records of doing innovative research themselves. Most of these people are faculty members at universities and colleges, but we also use some independent scholars.

The next consideration is that we really have to feel that we’re covering the range of applications that are represented in a particular pool. So for example, I chaired a panel on European literature and film and I had sitting on that panel a professor of German literature, a professor of Russian studies, a specialist in German cinema who also had publications in the field of comp lit. I had a professor Italian literature and the fifth member of the panel was a specialist in Spanish literature in cinema. French by the way was covered in a separate panel under the name of Romance Studies. So that’s why there is no representative of that field on that panel.

To give you another example. For the summer stipends competition I’m putting together a panel on modern British literature and I’ve recruited someone who does James Joyce, someone who does post-1945 fiction, a specialist in romantic poetry and I’ll round out that panel with a specialist in the 19th Century novel.

We also want to have a balance of men and women, a balance of junior and senior scholars. We want to have geographic diversity. We want to have diversity of institution types. Then ideally we want to have at least one person who’s previously had an NEH grant or who has previous experience as a panelist and also one person who has no such previous connection with the NEH.

So you can see we really have quite a lot of things that we’re thinking about when we’re putting together these panels.”