

# National Endowment's Summer Vacation



A professor goes to school

Shortly after the New Year, the list appears on the National Endowment for the Humanities Website, and, as soon as I return to my office after the holidays, I spend a morning carefully perusing it. I can't apply to many of the summer research seminars and institutes for college and university faculty members, due to the calendar differences between American and British universities: many programs begin shortly after Memorial Day when American institutions have already held graduation but when their British analogues remain embroiled in external examiners' boards and degree-classification meetings. Dreaming of July in the midst of January, I look through my abbreviated list and am pleased that, although "Early American Microhistories" is no longer a possibility for me, "Encounters between Europeans and Indigenous Americans, 1550-1750" is still an option. With an eye on the March 1 deadline, I begin the process of applying, working on my personal statement, contacting my referees, and taking care to emphasize throughout my application that, despite my British address and university affiliation, I am indeed an American citizen and thus meet the qualifications for participation in this institute.

Friends and colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic are puzzled by my desire to devote five weeks of my summer "vacation" to a project that will keep me

away from both research and recreation. They are still more perplexed when they realize that I am committing myself to a situation in which I will be, more or less, a student, not a teacher; as little desire as many academics have to teach summer school, at least it is a familiar situation to them. "Why do you want to *go back to school*?" is a phrase that I hear again and again, despite the fact that the NEH has offered such summer programs for the past two decades. No doubt each of the several hundred academics who participate each summer in these projects has his or her own very specific reasons for choosing to devote a large chunk of the summer break to it, but what follows are my thoughts on the immediate and enduring value of being part of such an endeavor.

As an American who pays her taxes to a government whose decisions she frequently disapproves of, I find a certain degree of satisfaction at the thought of getting some of that money back in the form of the NEH stipend. Of course, the majority of this stipend is devoted, and rightly so, to paying for transportation, accommodation, food, and books for the duration of the institute. I may not be Robin Hood, but nonetheless I gain an admittedly childish sense of glee from this minor act of resource redistribution. Still greater satisfaction comes from looking over the list of topics for NEH-sponsored gatherings. Many of these seem to offer a latent or, occasionally, an overt challenge to the policies and ideologies of the current administration.

How, I wonder, might our president, so dedicated to drilling for oil in the High Arctic, feel about a seminar on the concepts of "Environmental Ethics and Issues: Alaska as a Case Study"? Our "second lady" Lynne Cheney is well known for her concern with what she sees as the narrative of America's heritage of freedom; was she the intended audience for "Landmarks of American Democracy: Freedom Summer to the Memphis Sanitation Strike"? What might John Roberts or his Senate interlocutors make of a month of study on the intersection of "Religious Diversity and the Common Good"? How might Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum approach the conjunction of "Science and Values"? When one considers the current political climate and recalls the struggles of the NEA, the NEH's sister agency, over its funding of such allegedly blasphemous, pornographic, and just plain un-American artists as Robert Mapplethorpe and Karen Finley, it is tempting to view participation in one of these programs as one of those rare occurrences in which financial and professional achievement can go hand in hand with political ideology.

To promulgate such a view, however, would be unfair: not only would it contradict both the letter and the spirit of the NEH's programs, but it would minimize the many benefits of participating in these summer research seminars and institutes. Throughout the five weeks at my institute, I read literally thousands of pages of primary and secondary texts relating to encounters between Europeans and Native Americans, including many works that I had long intended to explore but for which I had never made the time. I exchanged ideas with the other two dozen participants, with the institute's director, and with several visiting faculty members. This allowed me to come into contact with people from numerous disciplines—history and literature were numerically

dominant, but sociology, anthropology, art history, and geography were also represented—and at every stage of their academic careers, from ABD graduate students to scholars for whom retirement was drawing into view. Moreover, the institute's location at the John Carter Brown Library, with its abundant resources and skilled staff, allowed all participants to explore visual and textual representations of "the encounter" at an unparalleled level of sophistication.

But as much as I learned from the manifest content of this institute—and I learned a great deal—what was at least as valuable to me and, I believe, to my fellow participants was what I learned about teaching and learning.

To begin with, it was very difficult for seminar participants not to recognize the importance of understanding, respecting, and responding to differences in practice between various disciplines. The value of interdisciplinarity is something most of us within the academy are familiar with and to which many pay lip service. But here, there was no lip service. Interdisciplinarity was central to our entire enterprise. In our first meeting, the institute's director invoked a series of academic keywords representing recent approaches to the study of the humanities and the social sciences—*post-structuralism*, *new historicism*, *cultural relativism*—and asked our group to come up with working definitions of these. Initially, I was skeptical of the value of such an endeavor: didn't we (or at least I) already have well-developed understandings of these terms? And if we didn't, who among us would be willing to admit it? Yet the ensuing discussion made it clear that our individual ideas, however highly we might think of them, were in many cases quite limited, particularly when we were asked to employ them within the context of another discipline in the humanities or social sciences.

For example, a scholar of literature pointed out that the textual focus of the whole concept of new historicism ignored relevant social context, and a sociologist queried the innately bourgeois standpoint from which academics employed theories of culture. Soon afterwards, a seemingly simple question regarding the extent to which English had supplanted Latin as the language of state in seventeenth-century Britain sparked a realization that historians and literary scholars began with very different assumptions, based on the textual corpus with which they were familiar.

It occurred to me at the halfway point of our five weeks together that, while we were working together to understand the ethnographic strategies that undergirded the encounters between Native Americans and Europeans in North America, we were simultaneously carrying out our own communal ethnography of one another and of our disciplinary allegiances; we were challenging each other as individuals and as historians, anthropologists, geographers, *et al.* to share with the whole seminar how a particular disciplinary sub-group might evaluate or illuminate a particular image, text, or idea.

At the same time that we were beginning to question familiar ways of looking at

our research materials, we were facing another challenge: ceding control over the classroom. However much we as individuals might work to render our classrooms open forums in which instructors and students engage in nonhierarchical interaction, some of us found it unusual and even frustrating to give up control over the progress of discussion, both in form and in content. It was a shock to realize that we could speak only when the seminar leader acknowledged our raised hands and called on us, to accept that, however crucial we believed our interventions to be, we were expected to wait until our turn came. I am willing, if embarrassed, to admit that I had a very difficult time accepting that it would have been a real breach of decorum simply to blurt out my ideas, however valuable, rather than awaiting my turn. Similarly, some of us (again, including myself) were quick to express annoyance when some visiting faculty members did not touch on the readings they had assigned—another instance in which we were reluctant to give up dominion over the classroom.

From this last point, it can be argued that, although we had begun the institute as teachers, confident in our professional status and expertise, it was surprisingly easy for us to metamorphose into students. Such a rapid shift was, perhaps, predestined for the half of our number who took the option to spend the five weeks in university housing; we soon became “institutionalized,” concerned about faulty air-conditioning and locked bathroom doors, leaving messages on door-mounted whiteboards, and carrying our toiletries in plastic buckets. But even those among us who led more adult lifestyles—renting off-campus apartments, sometimes with partners or children—soon found themselves in a strange process of regression.

Dressed in our summer casual wear of shorts, T-shirts, baseball caps, and sneakers, we felt both guilty and gleeful when we came late to sessions, grew cranky when we became hot, tired, or bored, and, after a “field trip” (complete with yellow bus and buddy system) to the Peabody Museum, scattered throughout Harvard Square in search of burgers, milkshakes, and shopping opportunities. This sense of adopting a student mentality along with a student lifestyle was especially evident on the final day, when we said our goodbyes with a definite end-of-semester feeling, taking group photographs, swapping addresses, and promising to stay in touch. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if, as we drove back around the Great Lakes or rode Amtrak down the East Coast, we felt ourselves undergoing a change, slipping off our temporary student veneer and becoming our academic selves again.

It is this temporary return to the mental and physical experience of our students that I think is the most valuable aspect of the NEH-summer-institute experience. After five weeks, our group learned something about communicating across disciplines and something more about understanding the encounters between inhabitants and invaders of North America, encounters that continue to shape American identity, ideology, and policy. But as the gap between our experience of academia as students and as teachers expands, it is this ability to regain, even temporarily, the student’s-eye view of our material, our

disciplines, and our pedagogic practice that is the most critical encounter of all. Although we may think of ourselves, at least in our most confident moments, as dynamic young intellectuals, the sort of repositioning that participation in one of these institutes requires humbles us, sending us back across decades and into younger, less certain versions of ourselves, and this makes us better teachers.

By way of conclusion, I suggest that these sorts of lessons could benefit not only academics, but policy makers as well. Humility and empathy (rhetoric notwithstanding), not to mention historical awareness, appear to be in rather short supply among those who populate the upper ranks of our government. If we, and by extension our students, can gain so much when we are encouraged to open our minds and to question monolithic approaches to questions and problems, how much more might we all gain if not only the Ann Coulters and Robert Novaks, but the Karl Roves, and indeed the Cheneys and Bushes, were compelled to question their own convictions and competencies? What I learned over my "summer vacation" was that there's more than one way to skin a cat, and that's a lesson that no one, inside or outside the academy, can afford to ignore.

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