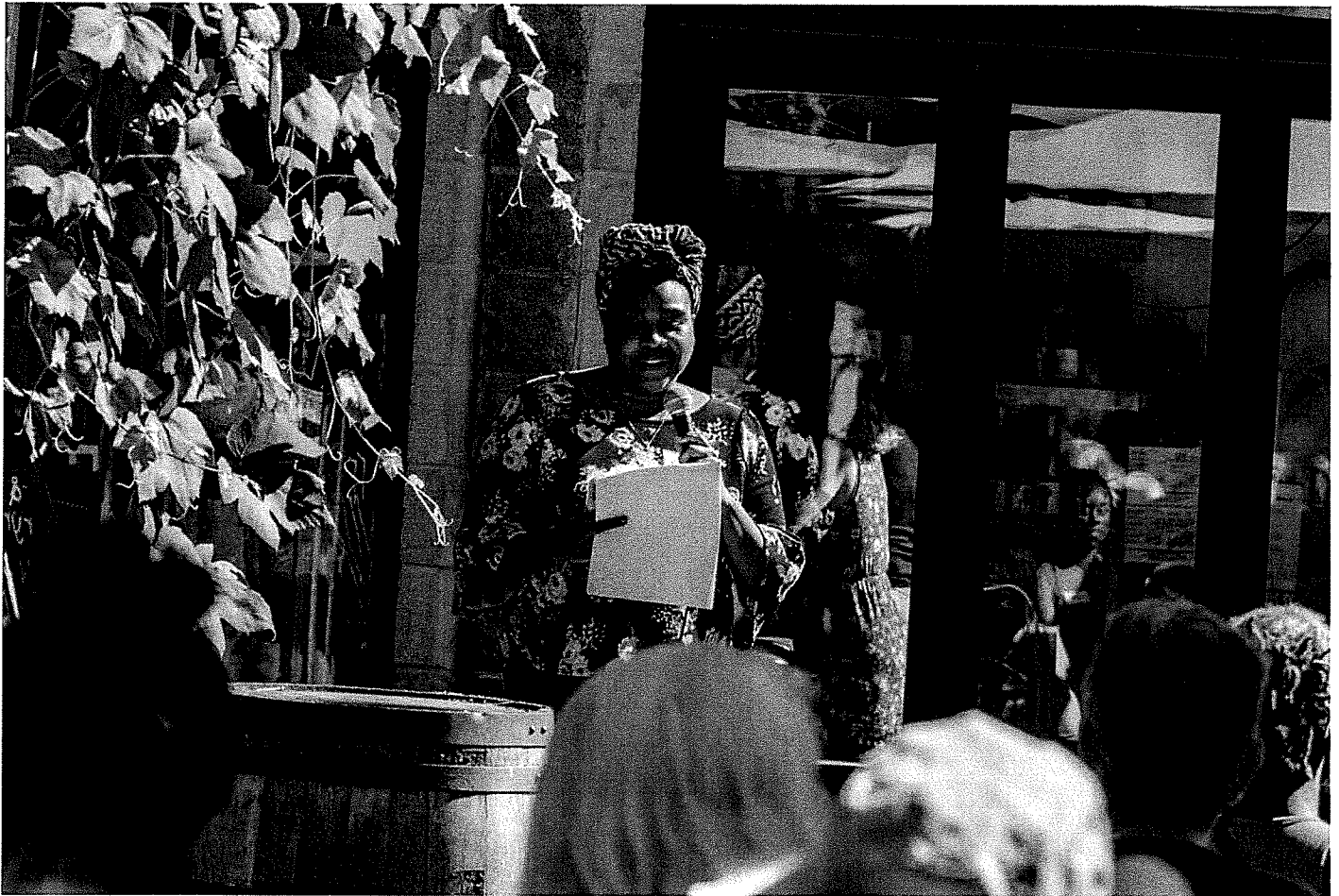


IDEAS

A noble endeavor for a Great Society is being abandoned

For decades, the National Endowment for the Humanities cultivated wisdom and vision in Americans. Trump and Musk are gutting it with such haste that the notice landed as email spam.

By **Brian Boyles** Updated April 9, 2025, 38 minutes ago



Kyera Singleton read from Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" in Somerville in 2022. One now-canceled National Endowment for the Humanities grant in Massachusetts was supposed to help more than 60 organizations that host public readings of Douglass's speech. JEN ATWOOD/MASS HUMANITIES

Brian Boyles is executive director of Mass Humanities, a nonprofit foundation that is the Massachusetts affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The National Endowment for the Humanities emerged during the Great Society era. The cascade of promises made by the federal government under President Lyndon B. Johnson included a commitment to arts and culture alongside equal voting rights, fair housing, and clean air. The legislation that created the NEH and the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965 sang with the aspirations of its time.

“Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens,” the act declares. The arts and the humanities “make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.” Johnson signed the legislation in the Rose Garden, surrounded by more than 200 people, including the novelist Ralph Ellison, the actor Gregory Peck, and the photographer Ansel Adams. “Art is a nation’s most precious heritage,” Johnson told the crowd of luminaries. “The arts and the humanities belong to the people, for it is, after all, the people who create them.”

Last week, those words rang hollow. Following a visit by members of Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency to its headquarters, NEH cancelled thousands of grants to museums, historic sites, archives, and state humanities councils, including Mass Humanities, the organization I lead. In contrast to the soaring language and august setting of the NEH’s origins, the messages that ended the nation’s commitment to the humanities arrived, literally, as spam.

At 12:39 a.m. on April 3, I received two emails from an account unknown to me, one I later learned was DOGE-related. After being notified of the emails by a colleague in another state, I found them in the junk mail folder. The emails were duplicates, each attached to a letter from the acting chair of NEH informing me that the agency’s two grants to Mass Humanities were being terminated. The termination was “an urgent priority” and therefore “the traditional notification process is not possible.” NEH would

be repurposing the funds to follow “a new direction in furtherance of the President’s agenda.”

Similar messages were received by many other NEH grantees around the nation in the middle of the night. Many reported that they, too, had to search for the emails, the contents of which could trigger layoffs and even the closure of some organizations. Where once the federal government took pride in its investment in the humanities, today it breaks its word with little more than a form letter full of vague excuses.

Given the history of the NEH, its midnight missive last week was akin to a parent suddenly texting a child not to come home anymore.

While the National Endowment for the Arts supports the creation of visual and performing arts and arts education, the NEH supports interpretation, research, and public history. If the NEA is the painting on the wall, NEH is the text that accompanies it telling you about the artist, their history, and where and when the painting was made.

Several years after the NEH launched, Congress was concerned that its funds weren’t reaching local communities. So it amended the legislation to establish state councils that could disperse the funds. In 1974, a committee formed at UMass Amherst gave rise to Mass Humanities as our state’s NEH affiliate.

Mass Humanities, like our sibling councils in other states, is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization. Each council receives an annual grant from NEH through an allocation based largely on population. In 2024, \$65 million was distributed among all the state councils, roughly 30 percent of NEH’s annual budget of \$207 million. You might even say this public-private partnership is efficient.

The \$1.3 million Mass Humanities receives in annual funding is minuscule in the federal budget, so there’s not much of a case for these cuts eliminating wasteful government spending.

A portion of our NEH grant goes to the Clemente Course in the Humanities, an adult education program that offers free college-level classes in six of Massachusetts' "gateway cities." Along with books, transportation vouchers, and graduation certificates, NEH dollars helped us provide free laptops for student writers who contributed to two anthologies, "We, Too, Are America," and "This Is Your Democracy," during the pandemic. We fund projects at local museums and historic sites that want to build their audiences and collections. These include the redesign of the Lawrence State Heritage Park's welcome center to cover histories of the city's Latino population and exhibitions about the lives of immigrant communities at the New Bedford Fishing and Heritage Center.

Our annual NEH grant also supports our team's work with rural communities on "Voices & Votes: Democracy in America," a Smithsonian traveling exhibition set to kick off this month. Staff from local museums receive training on serving hearing-impaired audiences, partnering with immigrant communities, and marketing. One now-canceled NEH grant to Mass Humanities was supposed to cover supplies and travel to Boston for a workshop for more than 60 organizations that host public readings of Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"

The organizations we support are not bastions of the elite. From libraries in Brockton to human service centers in Springfield, our partners are beloved by their audiences, but none of them can fall back on billion-dollar endowments.

Still, we are lucky to live in Massachusetts. NEH provides 35 percent of Mass Humanities' annual budget, and we may still find private funders to help us fill the NEH gap. For humanities councils in cash-strapped states or states with political climates hostile to cultural funding, the NEH cuts will be death sentences. Layoffs, cancellation of grant-making, and the end of public programs are already underway in red and blue states alike.

There is still hope of stopping the NEH cuts. Humanities councils enjoy bipartisan support. But we live in a historically dangerous moment. In 1965, federal funding for the humanities began with a clear statement, made publicly in the presence of great artists and enshrined in legislation declaring that our democracy “cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology.” In 2025, the people running our government tell us that the humanities are nothing more than spam. Though clumsy and callous, that message was clear.

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