

Long criticized by conservatives, this federal agency has transformed under Trump

The National Endowment for the Humanities has shifted its grant-making to align with the president's cultural agenda, rankling the scholarly establishment.

By **Julian E.J. Sorapuru** Globe Staff, Updated June 7, 2026, 7:08 a.m.



The building that houses the National Endowment for the Humanities. MATT MCCLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON — During the final days of the Biden administration, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded [\\$23 million toward 219 projects](#). Under President Trump this year, the agency awarded [\\$75 million to just 84 projects](#).

The grant-making shift, both in volume and dollar amount, is one of many changes the Trump administration has made to the federal humanities endowment.

[Long-criticized by conservatives](#) for funding projects reflective of liberal sensibilities, the NEH has also undergone a cultural transformation over the last year and a half, transforming into a vehicle to amplify the president's cultural agenda.

The Massachusetts Historical Society, for example, was awarded NEH grants in both 2025 and 2026. The society's project last year was approved for \$190,000 — a grant amount close to the NEH average — to train K-12 educators on teaching an inclusive

narrative about the American Revolution, featuring the stories of Black and Indigenous people and women.

This year however, the society received a whopping \$3 million from the NEH for a more traditional history proposal: to prepare the personal papers of Founding Father John Adams for publication.



Visitors toured the Massachusetts Historical Society's collection. MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Normally, the endowment awards grants to such places as museums, archives, universities, and cultural organizations in communities across all 50 states and six US jurisdictions for projects rooted in the humanities, a catch-all term for fields of study relating to the human experience.

Some of its most prominent 2026 grant recipients are [institutions bankrolled by conservative donors](#). Others are intentionally undertaking projects rooted in traditional Western historic narratives — particularly [related to America's 250th anniversary](#), in lockstep with the Trump administration's cultural agenda.

For Democratic Representative Chellie Pingree of Maine, a leading congressional advocate for the arts and humanities, the national endowment's conservative metamorphosis is indicative of Trump "taking over of our cultural institutions."

This move, Pingree said, “is often overlooked in the scheme of a war, a health care cut, increasing cost of food. But I think [cultural institutions] are fundamental to our democracy as well, and that we should be wary when one president wants to be the final decider on what can be displayed in a museum or what books can be read or how arts can be funded.”

Historically, Trump had aimed not only for ideological control of the endowment but to dismantle it. [Dating back to his first term](#), Trump’s budget proposals have suggested [terminating NEH along with its sister agencies](#), the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

However, Congress has long maintained bipartisan support for the agencies, including approving a \$207 million National Endowment for the Humanities budget for fiscal year 2026.

Having failed to terminate the NEH, Trump has repurposed it for his own devices. Two of his [numerous Washington-based construction projects](#) — the Triumphal Arch and the [National Garden of American Heroes](#) — will receive [\\$15 million](#) and [\\$17 million](#) respectively from the the endowment’s coffers.

In Massachusetts, the Abigail Adams Institute — [a conservative-backed organization](#) that hosts lectures and reading groups rooted in the Western canon just off Harvard’s campus — received a [\\$2 million NEH grant](#) this year for a project titled: “Supplementary Humanities at Harvard.”

Harvard has [endured heavy scrutiny](#) from the Trump administration for perceived liberal bias. The White House has demanded Harvard foster “[viewpoint diversity](#)” on campus, a goal the Abigail Adams Institute shares. Though the institute has no formal ties to the university, it was cofounded in 2014 by William E. English, at the time a Harvard ethics researcher who is today the [acting NEH chairman](#).

Many of the endowment's grants have traditionally gone to university professors conducting research in fields that receive less funding compared to other academic disciplines like the sciences. Despite its relatively modest budget, it is [one of the largest funders of such programs in the country](#), offering the Trump administration outside control on the cultural direction of the field.

For Howard Husock, a senior fellow at the conservative-leaning think tank American Enterprise Institute, the endowment's efforts to align its grant-making with the values of the sitting president are nothing new.

"There's no doubt that the president wants to restore what he views as the traditional values and American story," he said. "The converse was just as true for those who wanted a more skeptical view of American history, if you will. ... The fairest way to say it is that the NEA and NEH have gotten caught up in the culture wars."

Husock, who is writing a book about the history of philanthropic foundations, said Trump's NEH is "a useful ballast" against private foundations with "strong progressive bias" accumulating too much influence over cultural programming.

Indeed, foundations represent among [the largest cultural donors](#) in the United States, some of which have [stepped in to fill federal funding gaps](#) created by the Trump administration.

The changes at NEH under Trump aren't just ideological, but structural.

Last June, about 100 employees, around two-thirds of its staff, [were laid off](#). In October, the White House via email [fired all but four members](#) of the 26-person National Council on the Humanities, the body which advises the NEH.

"I was not surprised that I was terminated from the council," Dr. Vanessa Northington Gamble, a Joe Biden-era nominee who had sat on the panel since 2022, told the Globe. "I mean, I do work on the history of race and racism in American medicine."

The council previously consisted of a wide range of scholars, authors, and artists serving six-year terms. As such, the panel was a mix of Biden and Trump nominees before the purge, all of whom had been confirmed to their seats by the Senate.

Gamble said that while the council members didn't always agree, "for the most part, I think people respected other people's opinions. ... We were there for a purpose. We were there to serve the American people and to advance the humanities."

However, she is worried that [the current council](#) — made up exclusively of white men nominated by Trump — is understaffed and lacks the diversity needed to equitably distribute funds across the country and properly vet grantees.

Aside from personnel changes, the size of grants has also changed. From 2021 to 2025, the average NEH grant was about \$128,000. This year, the average NEH grant is about \$893,000. The endowment also made [the largest grant in its history](#) at \$10.4 million to the conservative Jewish educational organization Tikvah.

Husock believes the new grant-making structure is strategic, not political, and reflects a high level of trust in the chosen organizations. This year's projects demonstrate "that there's a body of knowledge that needs to be passed on in the humanities that could potentially be lost," he said.

Meanwhile, state humanities councils — which funnel significant endowment funds to the cultural organizations that are priorities of each congressional district — have had their federal payouts [delayed and administered below congressionally approved levels](#).

Phoebe Stein, president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, said the reduction has caused a quarter of council staff to be laid off while 40 percent of programming has been cut, including initiatives focused on childhood literacy, writing workshops for veterans, and hyperlocal celebrations of the country's 250th birthday.

For now, Representative Pingree’s goal is keeping “the framework of the institution alive.”

Its grants, she said, “go to places that don’t have a lot of other sources to find arts or humanities-related funding. And I think it’s appalling that this administration would both take away the money from states across the country, and then use it for these vanity projects of the president.”

Julian E.J. Sorapuru can be reached at julian.sorapuru@globe.com. Follow him on X [@JulianSorapuru](https://twitter.com/JulianSorapuru).

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