

NEH Fellowships: Tips

Dennis P. Doordan

Professor, Department of Art, Art History and Design

University of Notre Dame

Reflections

The last time I served on an NEH panel the panel members were informed that given the number of applications received the NEH anticipated being able to fund only 13% of the grants we were asked to review. This means a brutal process of elimination based on very fine distinctions. The integrity of the process was exemplary. The panel possessed broad disciplinary knowledge & experience. Panel members had research and writing experience relevant to evaluating the proposed work schedules.

Panel members look for evidence that the applicant can position his/her work within a larger intellectual field. If an applicant uses a term such as critical – what does it mean?

Panel members look for evidence of clarity of thought demonstrated by the applicant's ability to write expansively about the topic but concisely in terms of length in the narrative of the project (i.e. an editor's assessment of the writer's ability).

An excellent proposal demonstrates the following:

- 1) Clarity of justification; for both the general and the specific: why this set of works and not another, why this decade in the artists life and not another
- 2) Ability to position the project in the larger field of studies
- 3) The persuasiveness of the work schedule: can we reasonably expect the applicant to accomplish what he/she says given the proposed time frame.
- 4) Stage of the work: Where is the applicant in the project? At the initial stages? Close to completion? (I tend to favor projects nearing completion because I believe institutional support and other resources exist for the initial exploratory stages of a project.) The panel asks the question: why does this need funding support?

Five Recommendations

- 1) Read and re-read the published guidelines. It is surprising how often applicants fail to address all the questions and issues outlined in the guidelines.
- 2) Position your research within the field of scholarship. Explain the implications of your research for the larger field of study.
- 3) Clarity is important. Be clear about a) the anticipated outcome of your project, b) the work schedule and c) the status quo of the work.
- 4) Prepare your letter writers; there are good letters and bad letters. A good letter addresses not just your past accomplishments but the merits or relevance of your proposed research.
- 5) Provide a convincing bibliography. Use the bibliography to demonstrate your command of the field.