

Douglas Wayman

Another reason academic libraries should love the NEH

Or what I did last summer

This essay is an implicit argument for academic librarians to seek out and participate in National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Seminars and Institutes for Academic Faculty. It takes the form of my account of the NEH Seminar that I attended for four weeks in July 2022. The seminar was called *Printing and the Book During the Reformation: 1450–1650*, and it was aimed at higher education faculty. Since attending my first NEH Summer Institute in 2007, I've felt like this is a scholarly activity that librarians have not pursued as readily as others in the academic community, almost certainly because of the amount of time it takes, which is admittedly a challenge. Nevertheless, the payoff is worth it for participants and their organizations, especially for the three reasons I mention at the end.

This seminar took place at The Ohio State University and consisted of 16 participants from colleges and universities across the United States. With only a couple exceptions, all of our seminar activities took place in the Thompson Library and mostly in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library (RBML), or the glass-fronted classroom at the opposite end of the first floor.

We had journal articles to read for every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—typically a few on Mondays and a couple on Wednesdays and Fridays. The articles would give us insight into the topic of the week, which was also informed by the visiting guest scholar for that week. On Mondays, the program director, Mark Rankin, would open the session with a brief overview of the week, and then individual participants would lead discussion of an article (for which we signed up at the beginning of the seminar). After presenting a brief introduction, the participant leader would pose a series of questions for discussion, and off we would go! The discussions were lively and engaging with participants bringing perspectives from their particular interest, discipline, or background. At the end of the discussion a couple of participants would give short presentations on their current research. Afterward, informal discussions would often extend into small group conversations during the lunchtime that followed.

Every afternoon, Monday through Saturday, the reading room of the RBML was open for us to work with the books or manuscripts we selected from handlists before the seminars began. My selections were mainly printed in Venice between 1477 and 1567. My cart was set up with these items every afternoon, and I worked with them for 3 to 4 hours each day. Those 50–60 Venetian items formed the basis for my required seminar project, and future research as well, namely to ascertain the effect of Venetian printing upon the Reformation or vice-versa. The seminar project will be retained in the James Madison University repository.

Douglas Wayman is head of electronic resources and collection metadata management at the University of Notre Dame Hesburgh Libraries, email: dwayman2@nd.edu.

© 2023 Douglas Wayman

On Wednesdays we would have a new visiting scholar. The topic of the week was coordinated with their research specialty, and our articles for that day were often written by that individual. Guido Latré from the University of Louvain presented aspects of the Reformation in the Low Lands. Martha Driver from the US introduced us to aspects of iconoclasm in regard to illustration. Giles Mandelbrote was a librarian from the Lambeth Palace in London. Alex Walsham, also from England, focused on women and devotional reading. The visiting scholars were in the reading room on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons where they were available for further questions and conversation.

On Fridays, the program director worked with the visiting scholar to assemble an exhibit of 20–25 items from the RBML focused on the theme for the week. All aspects of the item were open for discussion, from the author and content to the printer and item provenance. The head of the RBML, Eric Johnson, was also present at these exhibitions and added greatly to the discussion. Later, after a full Friday afternoon in the reading room, we would all adjourn to the campus faculty club where there would be a reception for that week's scholar. Some of the most informative and engaging conversations took place in that informal setting.

That was the July seminar in a nutshell. If intensive study of an engaging topic sounds like something that would interest you, you should keep an eye on the NEH website.¹ The coming summer programs for higher education faculty are usually available in January. They are academically challenging, intellectually stimulating, and overly satisfying scholarly activities.

Now, concerning the payoff reasons I mentioned at the beginning: the first is that these kinds of liberal arts “think tanks” or “salons” are few and far between these days. Getting the opportunity to interact with a cross-section of established and new, upcoming academics focused on a single topic for an extended period is very unusual for librarians (even subject librarians) and worth the effort. The second is that the inclusion of librarians in such an enterprise is both an honor and a responsibility. In the earlier days of these programs, librarians were included by name as persons qualified to participate in the programs. In more recent times, with the NEH under more scrutiny, participants other than teaching faculty, like librarians, are no longer mentioned by name, but included as those “who demonstrate that their participation will advance project goals and enhance their own professional work.”² Librarian interest and participation helps keep this exceptional professional development opportunity open for future librarians. The third and final reason is that it is truly a scholarly activity, very competitive to get into and a shining beacon in the CV of any librarian seeking rank promotion or tenure. While it is challenging, it is also like having fifteen empathetic advisors asking what you are working on and how it is going every day for a month!

I hope I've convinced you to look into the NEH Professional Development Programs for Higher Education Faculty. Applications for all programs close on March 3, 2023. *zz*

Notes

1. “Professional Development Programs,” National Endowment for the Humanities, accessed January 16, 2023, <https://www.neh.gov/divisions/education/summer-programs>.

2. National Endowment for the Humanities, “Participant Eligibility Criteria: Institutes for Higher Education Faculty,” accessed January 23, 2023, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/Participant%20Eligibility%20Criteria%20-%20Institutes%20for%20Higher%20Education%20Faculty.pdf>.