

The Landscape of Humanities Research and Funding

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The information provided by the Humanities Indicators Prototype is among the most thorough collections of data on the state of the humanistic disciplines in our recent history. Part IV of the indicators, on Humanities Funding and Research (HFR),¹ is no exception. Most academics will not be surprised by its findings—which complicate but do not fundamentally alter what almost all scholars recognize as a dangerous decline in both absolute and relative support for research across most areas of humanistic scholarship. The data provided by this study, however, do reveal a number of important trends that help explain our current and perhaps future circumstances.

An examination of funding for the humanities must begin with a recognition of the enormous range of activities that the term *humanities* suggests. Funding for what we call the humanities is not mainly directed toward scholarship. Recipients include museums, historical societies, libraries, ethnic and cultural awareness programs, teacher training, reading promotion, and many other activities. Not-for-profit humanities organizations in the United States receive more than \$10.5 billion a year. Additional monies flow into arts organizations, such as opera and theater companies, that are closely tied to humanistic disciplines. Not surprisingly, only a small fraction of this funding flows into formal humanistic scholarship.

Nor do the academic humanities receive much of the government funding that flows into most universities—for understandable reasons. Scientists and engineers require enormous investments in laboratories, equipment, staff, and supplies. Some social science fields develop large, collaborative projects using massive data sets and significant technological and staff support. By contrast, most humanists need little infrastructure. What they mostly require is time and access to archives or other, mostly library-based research institutions.

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But the level of need is not the only factor that makes the humanities fields paupers among nonacademic humanities organizations and other scholarly disciplines. Another factor is the perception of the humanities fields' relative "usefulness." Academic humanists correctly argue that their work is of great importance to the larger world, as a source of values and knowledge that is of both moral and practical importance.

But the humanities rarely attract the same kind of broad attention in the nonacademic world that scientists and many social scientists attract.

The data in the HFR, however, tell a more discouraging story than these obvious differences among fields. The historic gulf between funding for science, engineering, and some social sciences on the one hand, and the humanities on the other, are neither new nor surprising. What is troubling is that the humanities, in fact, are falling farther and farther behind other areas of scholarship. The most vivid evidence of this decline is the funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the major federal agency providing support for humanistic disciplines. Even at the best of times for the NEH, the difference between its funding and that of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) has been vast. NIH funding in 2007, a lean year for the agency, was just under \$30 billion, and NSF funding in that same year was well over \$5 billion. NEH funding in 2007 was approximately \$138.3 million—0.5 percent of NIH funding and 3 percent of NSF (Figure IV-1a).² No one would expect the humanities to receive funding comparable to the medical and other sciences or even some of the social sciences. But when adjusted for inflation, the NEH budget today is roughly a third of what it was 30 years

ago. Some of this decline has been a result of political controversies over how the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) distributed some of its grants—controversies that have indirectly affected NEH budgets as well.³ A more significant factor has been the general downward pressure on most federal budgets in response to tax cuts and other budgetary pressures.

Even this dismal picture exaggerates the level of support for humanities research, which is only a little over 13 percent of the NEH program budget, or about \$15.9 million (Figure IV-2). The rest of the NEH budget goes to a wide range of worthy activities. The largest single outlay is operating grants for state humanities councils, which disburse their modest funds mostly for public programs and support of local institutions. Government spending for the humanities, modest to begin with, goes overwhelmingly to projects that are at best loosely linked to scholarly research.

Nor do private sources do much better. Total foundation giving to the humanities more than doubled between 1992 and 2002, and giving to the humanities has grown as a result, although at a substantially slower rate than for other areas (Figure IV-8b). But only 2.1 percent of foundation giving in 2002 went to humanities activities (most of it to nonacademic activities), a 16% relative decline since 1992 (Figure IV-8c).

There are bright spots in the humanities landscape. The creation of the National Humanities Center 30 years ago has provided hundreds of scholars (myself among them) support for research and the benefit of a community of humanistic scholars. The more recent creation of the Center for Writers and Scholars at the New York Public Library has created similar support and a similar community for its grant recipients. A significant and growing number of universities—among them Harvard, Princeton,

Columbia, Stanford, and Michigan—have created humanities centers that host and support postdocs and visiting scholars. The enormous difference these institutions make for the fortunate scholars who benefit from them only highlights how scarce these opportunities are for most humanists.

The picture these data provide makes clear that Americans invest a great deal in humanistic activities, mostly through the private sector but with some government help. But the data also make clear that little of this funding goes to support academic research in the humanities. Many more people encounter humanities and the arts

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through the public institutions and programs that receive support than will come into contact with academic scholarship in the humanities. But these institutions themselves benefit enormously from the work of humanities scholars, and often engage them in their public activities, while providing no significant financial support for their research. There is, in other words, an important connection between what academics do and what the public sees, but little connection between the money that goes to public activities and the scholars who provide much of the knowledge on which these activities rely. The skewing of funding away from

scholarship and toward institutions serving the broader public endangers the health of both academia and the public it helps serve.

The Humanities Indicators Prototype also points out other growing problems confronting scholars. University presses have been facing increasing pressure for more than a decade, struggling to support scholarly publishing that does not have the potential to reach a large readership. Many monographs in small fields now sell only a few hundred copies, almost always losing money for the presses that publish them. Experiments in electronic publishing of humanities monographs have not yet been successful—either in lowering costs or in legitimizing academic work that has a wholly digital life. Hardly a month goes by without an article on the crisis of academic publishing, but no obvious solution to these problems has surfaced.

The difficulties university presses face are in part a response to another challenge to the future of the humanities: the declining capacity of academic libraries to purchase scholarly monographs. The median number of monographs per student that libraries have purchased over the last twenty years has declined by more than a third (Figure IV-11d), as have total library expenditures as a percentage of university budgets between 1975 and 2000 (Figure IV-11f). In the face of these financial pressures, academic libraries are increasingly forced to choose between buying serials and buying monographs. On the whole, they have chosen serials.

The most important support for the academic humanities comes from universities, and to their credit almost all major universities insist that strength in the humanities is essential to the health of their institutions. Even so, it is widely, and probably correctly, believed that universities seldom support the humanities as robustly as they support other

areas. Faculty in most science disciplines generate money for their universities—sometimes more than the salaries of their faculty cost. Faculty in other fields—economics, business, law, and others—have lucrative options outside the university and thus more leverage in negotiating salaries. Humanities faculty, by contrast, do not often bring money into the universities and do not have obvious alternative jobs in the private sector.

What impact does this impoverished funding landscape have on the health of the humanities? The data in this study do not reveal much about the consequences of its findings, now or in the future. Most outward signs suggest that humanists continue to thrive despite the lack of resources. Humanistic fields continue to create important and often pathbreaking scholarship and to offer challenging and popular courses to students. Top Ph.D. programs in the humanities, as well as jobs in humanistic fields, have no shortage of qualified applicants. The question that should concern us is not so much how the

humanities are doing now but how they will be doing over the next decade. The financial crisis of 2008 is a very serious immediate threat to all academic pursuits, and perhaps a long-term threat as well.

What are the critical indicators that will help us understand the changes that have occurred and the changes to

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come? What would trigger a truly catastrophic decline in humanistic scholarship and teaching? What can the government, the foundations, and the universities themselves do to assure the

future health of the humanities? These questions—difficult as they will be to answer—need the same kind of systematic attention as the impressive study the Humanities Indicators Prototype has provided.

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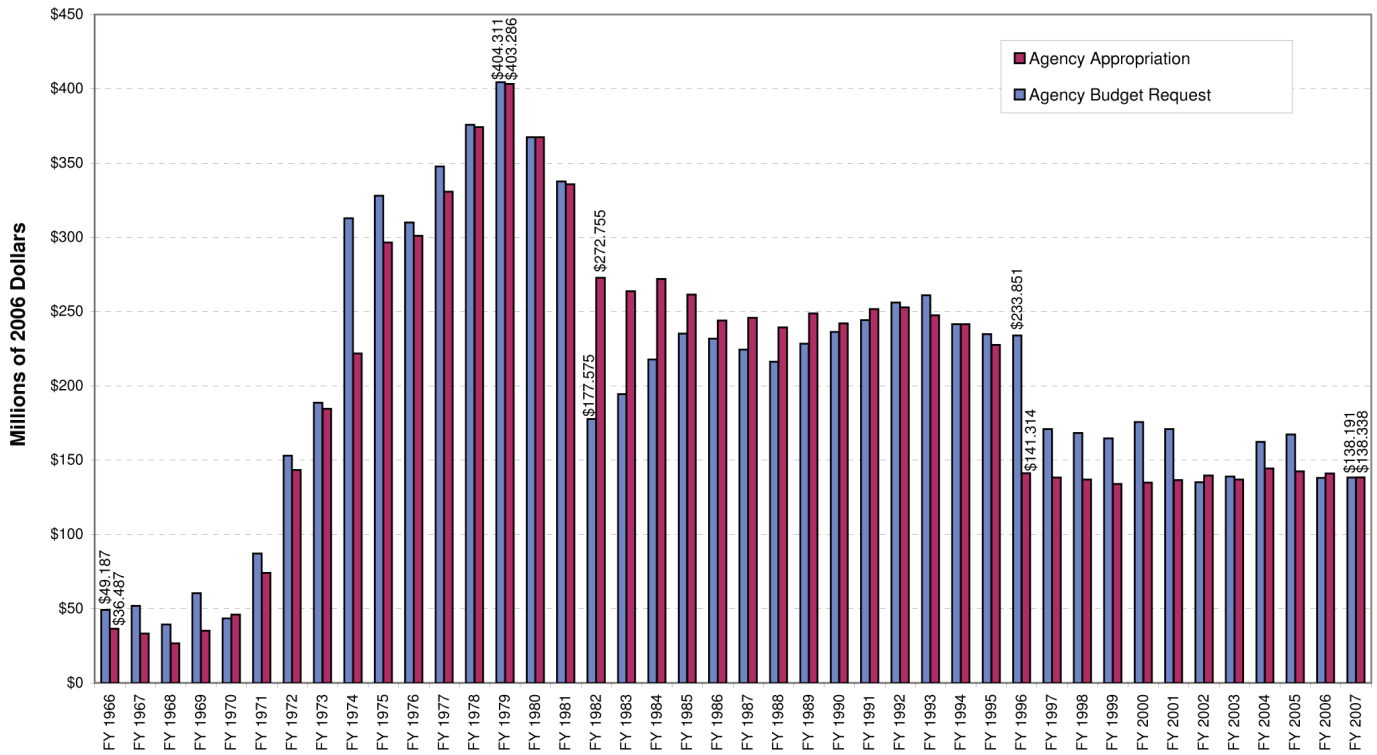
NOTES

¹ See *Humanities Indicators Prototype*, www.humanitiesindicators.org (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008); hereafter cited as HIP.

² All figures can be found in the HIP, *Part IV* and are reproduced at the end of this essay.

³ Among the controversies that have damaged NEH funding have been the controversy over the National History Standards in the early 1990s, and the backwash from even more corrosive controversies over NEA grants to artists.

Figure IV-1a: NEH Budget Request versus Final Appropriation* (Adjusted for Inflation), Fiscal Years 1966–2007

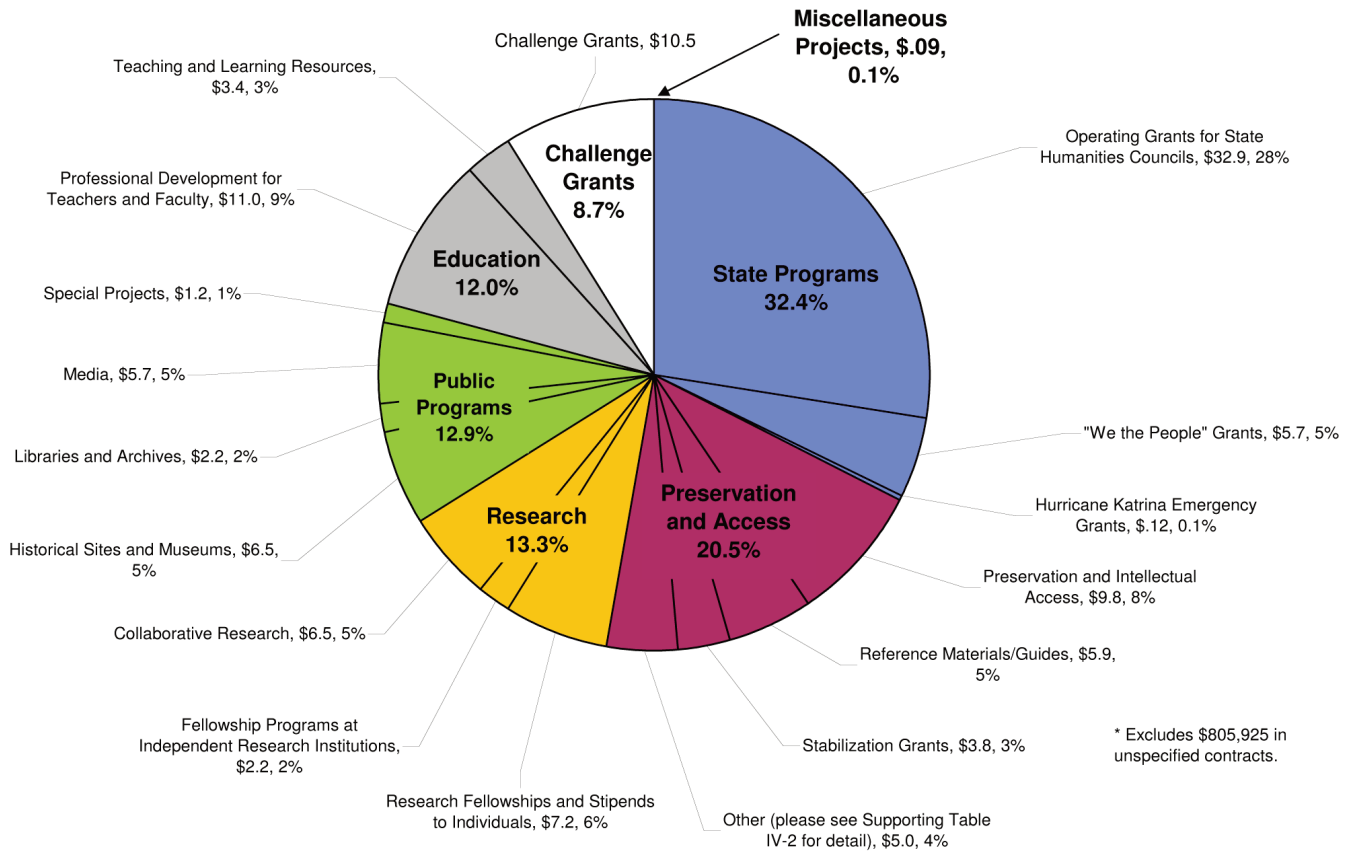


* Appropriations figures reflect any rescissions enacted in the course of a fiscal year.

Source: National Humanities Alliance (NHA). These data were compiled by NHA from documentation supplied by the National Endowment for the Humanities' Office of Strategic Planning. Both the budget and appropriation figures were adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) produced by the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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Figure IV-2: Distribution of NEH Program Funding* among Activity Types, Fiscal Year 2006
 (Millions of Current Dollars)

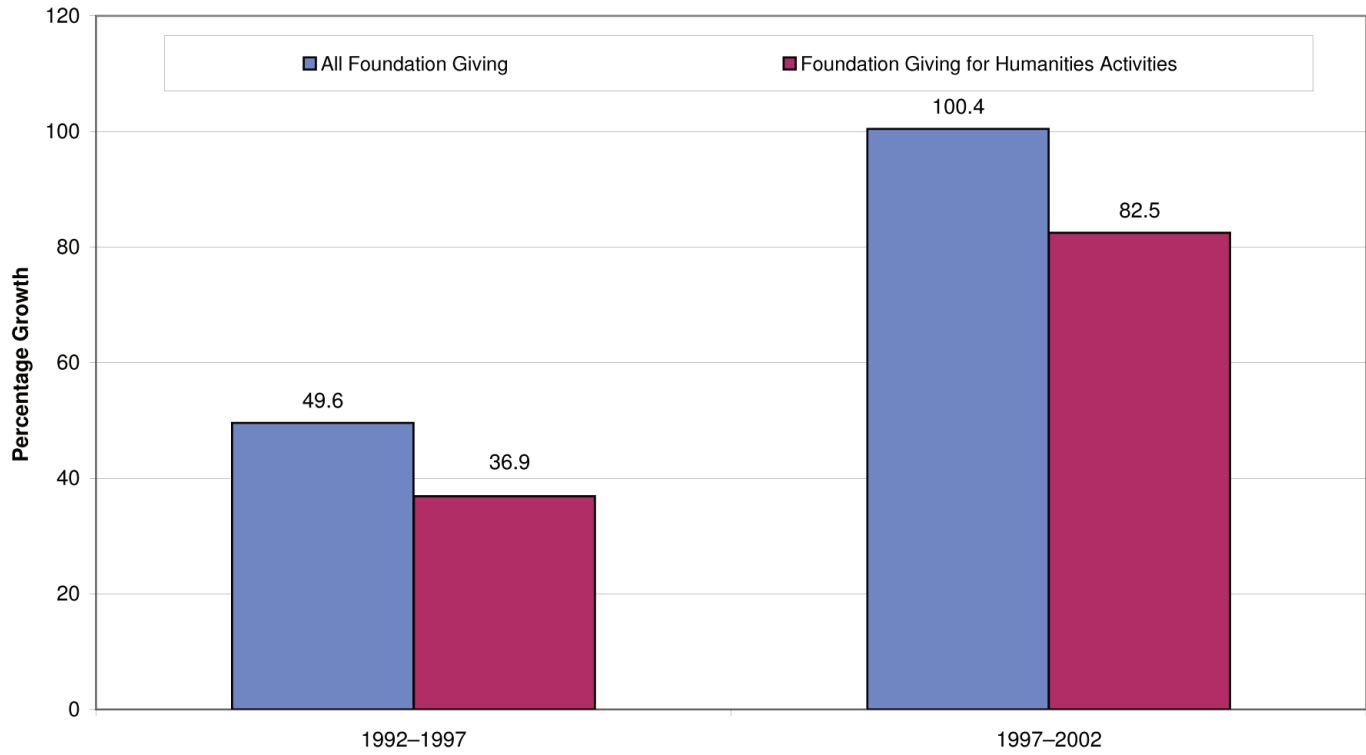


* Excludes \$805,925 in unspecified contracts.

Source: National Humanities Alliance (NHA). These data were compiled by NHA from documentation supplied by the National Endowment for the Humanities' Office of Strategic Planning.

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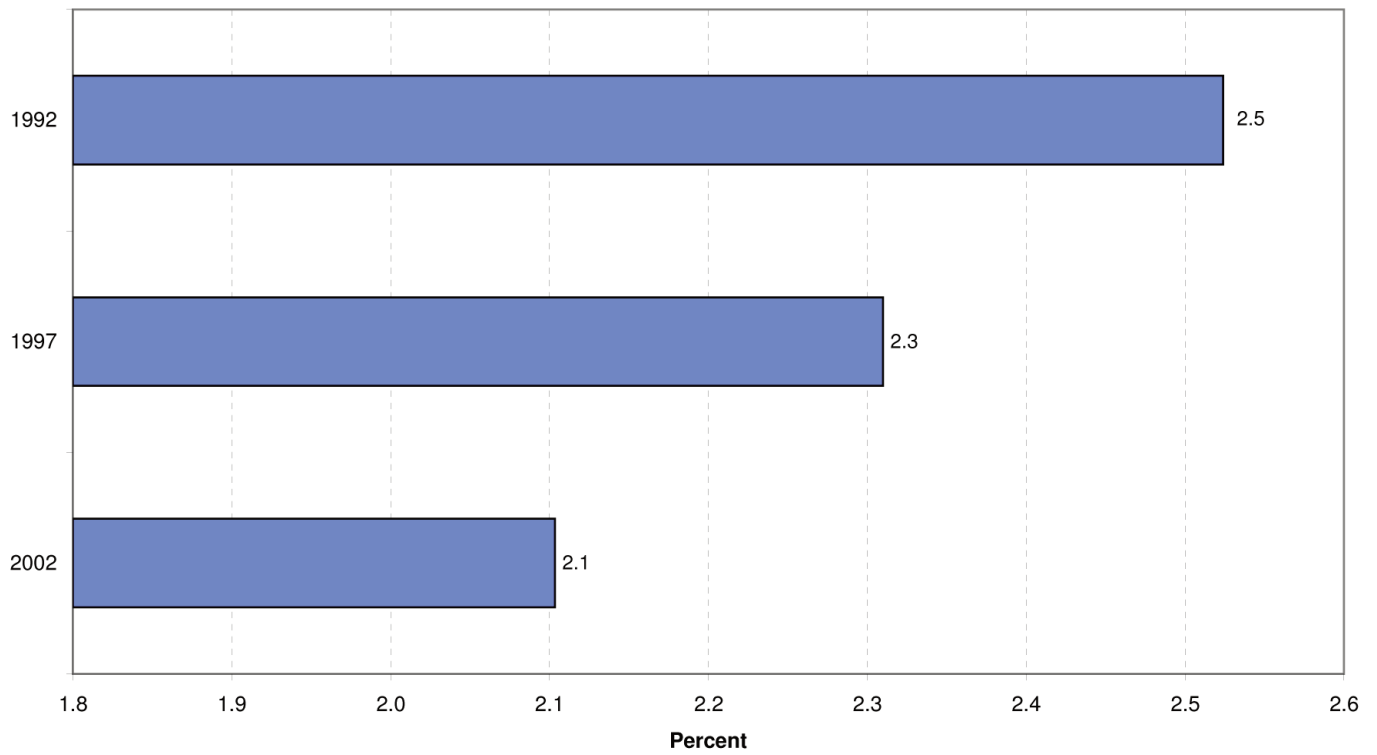
Figure IV-8b: Growth of Foundation Giving for Humanities Activities Compared to Foundation Giving Overall, 1992–2002



Source: Loren Renz and Steven Lawrence, *Foundation Funding for the Humanities: An Overview of Current and Historical Trends* (New York: The Foundation Center, 2004).

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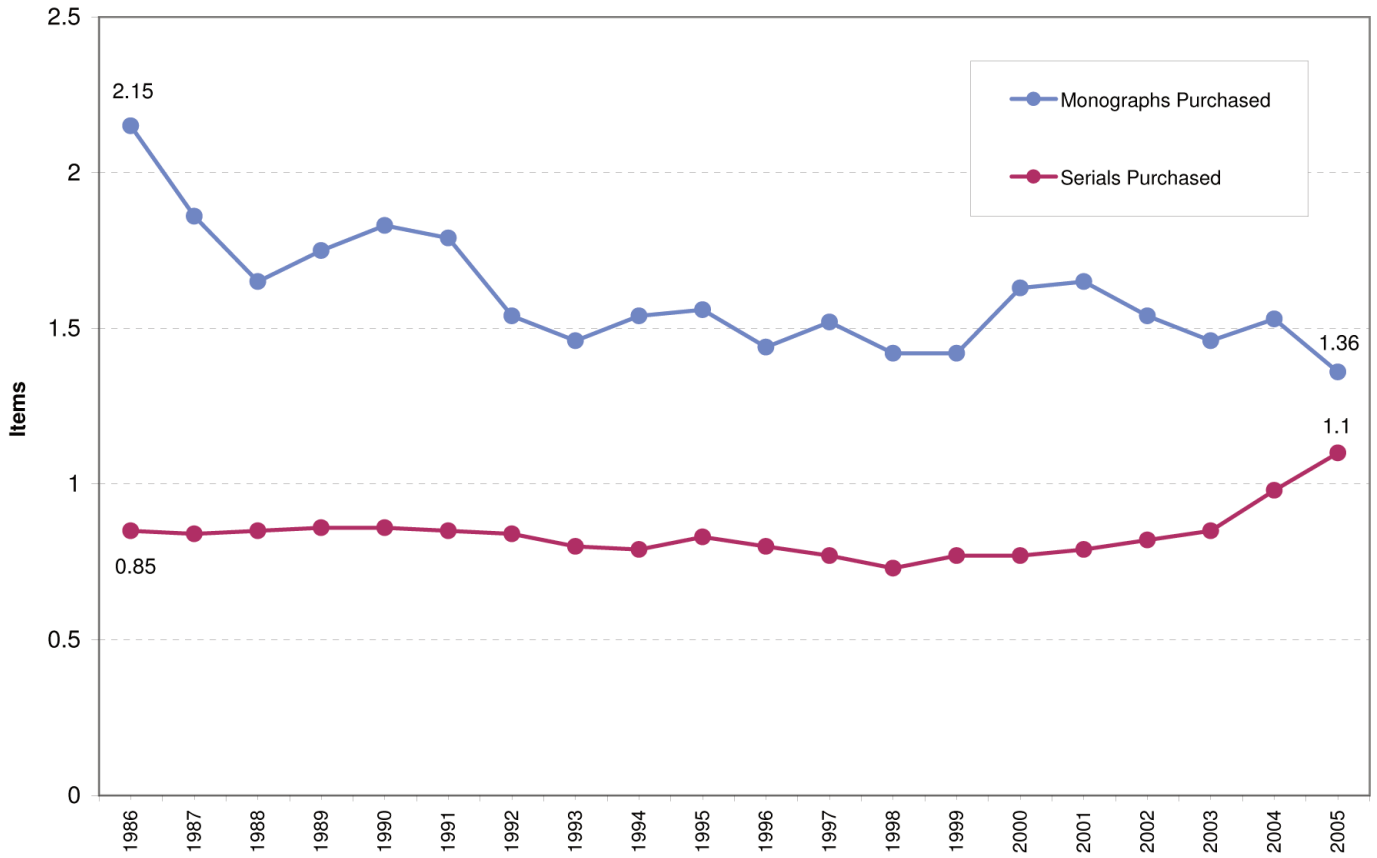
Figure IV-8c: Share of All Foundation Giving Going to Humanities Activities, 2002



Source: Loren Renz and Steven Lawrence, *Foundation Funding for the Humanities: An Overview of Current and Historical Trends* (New York: The Foundation Center, 2004).

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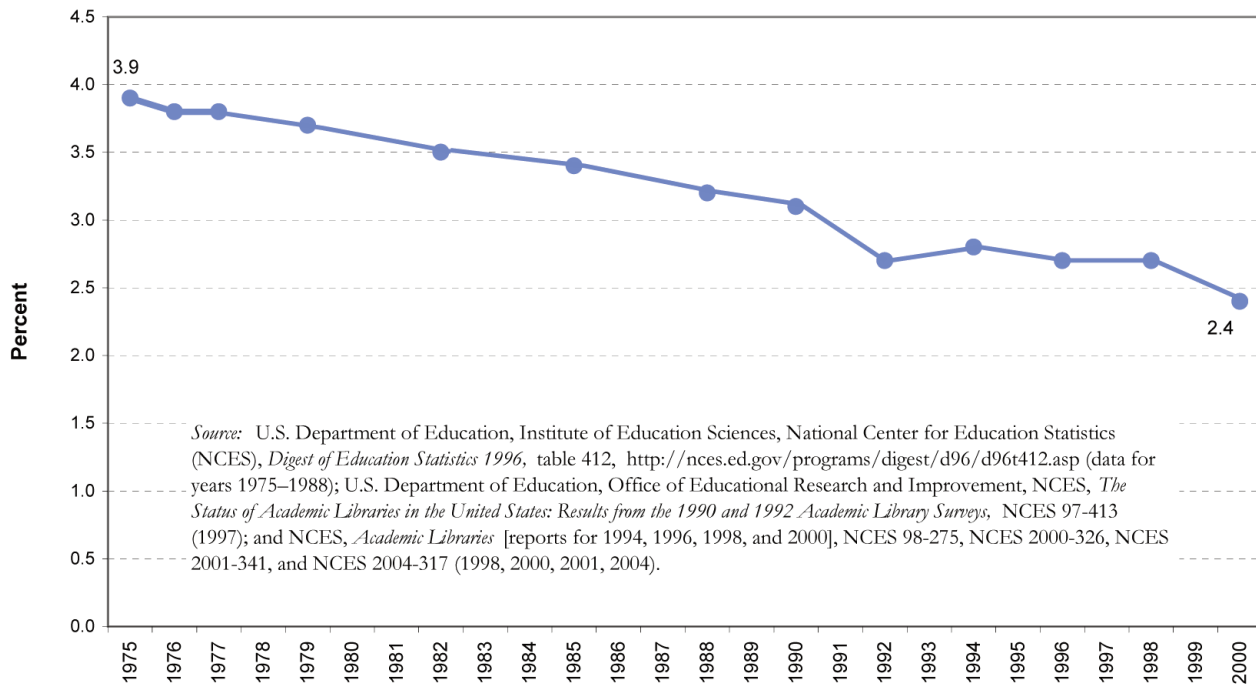
Figure IV-11d: Median Number of Monographs & Serials Purchased Per Student at Association of Research Libraries Member Institutions (Academic), 1986–2005



Source: Martha Kyrillidou and Mark Young, eds., *ARL Statistics 2004–05: A Compilation of Statistics from the One Hundred and Twenty-Three Members of the Association of Research Libraries* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2006), 18, table 5.

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Figure IV-11f: Median Percentage of Total Budget Spent on Library Services by Institutions of Higher Education, 1975–2000



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