INDEPENDENT SCHOLARS: A NEGLECTED BREED

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The status of public intellectuals and part-time faculty receives frequent attention, while that of independent scholars is usually ignored. Yet the production of more scholars than campuses employ inevitably puts a growing number outside the academic orbit. Either existing institutions—universities, research libraries, funding programs, scholarly societies, journals, and presses—will respond to the changing ecology of scholarship; new institutions will cater to it; or the excess scholars will waste like uncropped corn. To an extent, all three alternatives are likely. This article will discuss notable features that emerge from a review of the largely uncharted terrain of independent scholarship.

In various definitions, independent scholars are those unaffiliated with an academic, or with any institution, or whose work duties do not include research and scholarship. Typically, they are Ph.D.s in the humanities, often women, who, unable to find scholarly employment (“independent,” a wit says, is a euphemism for “unemployed”), pursue scholarly interests on their own. Though the term “scholar” is little used in the social sciences, many anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists, psychologists (75% of those who received a Ph.D. in 1999) practice their profession off campus.

The definition is a cloud that can obscure such basic questions as the number of independent scholars, their professional needs, and what policies best serve their interests. In practice, an independent scholar is anyone who believes he or she is one and whom a professional association, granting agency, or library accepts as one. In 1989, James Bennett, who received $148,000 from the Spencer Foundation to study independent scholars (and, housed at Northwestern, was then no longer independent), estimated that there were 20,000-25,000 in the humanities and social sciences. His estimate included all nonacademic scholars; the number of unaffiliated scholars was far lower. Few academic societies accurately represent the full spectrum of persons with graduate degrees in their field. Typically, they over-represent university faculty and under-represent faculty at 2- and 4-year colleges, masters and Ph.D.s in nonacademic jobs, and those who are unemployed or retired.

Academic Associations

About 180 (less than 1%) of the Modern Language Association’s U.S. and Canadian members identify themselves as independent scholars; 1900 do not report their employment status or institutional location, 650 have a nonacademic job, 2400 are retired, and 3700 appear to hold part-time, administrative, or nontenure-track positions at academic institutions. Thus, an unknown proportion of 7500 MLA members (excluding graduate students) might be termed “independent.”

The 30,000-member MLA has been sympathetic to independent scholars. Three serve as “special interest” delegates to the 250+ member Delegate Assembly; an annual prize is awarded for “a distinguished scholarly book” by an independent scholar or part-time or adjunct faculty; twenty local and national independent scholar groups are listed in the MLA Directory. In December 2000, the Delegate Assembly adopted resolutions “to encourage research libraries to rethink” their policies on lending, interlibrary loan, and electronic databases and provide fuller access to members who are unemployed, unaffiliated, or teaching at small colleges. (Association memory can be short: a similar resolution was adopted in 1993.) Fifteen independent scholar members held an “organizational session” at the December 2000 MLA meeting in Washington: no visible organization or communication emerged. Gloria Erlich, a student of Hawthorne and Wharton who has helped to raise
MLA awareness of independent scholars, says they are regarded "with respect—mixed, sometimes, with a tinge of envy for … [their] freedom from paper grading [and] faculty meetings." Executive Director Phyllis Franklin says MLA "has long recognized the value and importance of the work … [they] do."

About 2,000 (a fourth of) Ph.D. philosophers are not employed full-time in academic institutions. Some do not belong to the American Philosophical Association. Those who do have part-time academic appointments; work in government, business, schools, the nonprofit sector; are self-employed, unemployed, or retired. APA knows little about its independent members. Executive Director Elizabeth Radcliffe says there may be 100, but "we cannot survey this small group separately." APA offered a prize for the best book by a nonacademic philosopher. So few were submitted that the prize was offered for an unpublished essay in 2000, only one was submitted; in 2001, again only one.

The American Historical Association’s concerns about part-time faculty and nonacademic careers are often linked with the needs of "public" (nonacademic) and independent historians. Robert Darnton, AHA President in 1999, drew attention to the scholarly difficulties of nontenure-track and nonacademic historians—a majority of recent history Ph.D.s. "Many … live quite happily as ‘independents’ in government agencies and museums or simply in private life. But many more may live from hand-to-mouth and job-to-job in the backseats of their cars." In 2000, two of AHA’s six new $20,000 dissertation prizes went to independent scholars; the new AHA online directory lists independent, adjunct, and part-time historians omitted from its printed Directory of History Departments. The four-year-old Historical Society has also welcomed independent historians, though President Eugene Genovese remarked: "we cannot include people who do not present themselves … [or] seek out people who hide their light under the proverbial bushel."

When the History of Science Society was formed in 1924, there were no departments or academic appointments in the field. So, former HSS director Keith Benson observed, "essentially all society members were independent scholars." As the academic sector burgeoned after World War II, HSS remained attentive to nonacademic members. In the 1970s, issues involving "resources for unaffiliated scholars" were assigned to the Committee on Research and the Profession and later, its subcommittee on independent scholars. Independent scholars are nominated for positions on the governing board, participate in annual meetings and may receive travel funds to attend (and, formerly, small sums for research or travel to job interviews). HSS will administer their research grants.

In 1984, President Gerald Holton voiced fear of "an ugly split between the relatively few [members] who hold fairly secure positions … and the much larger and younger group … who do not." Most new HSS programs, he said, "are primarily to help the latter group." Some members "seemed to assume that academic positions were the only ones worth having," HSS director Michael Sokal declared, whereas many members "remained unaffiliated by choice." Despite its solicitude toward nonacademic members, HSS has no better idea of their number than may be inferred from two divergent facts: in October 2001, 58% of 2536 members have no "edu" e-mail suffix; in a recent survey, 3.6% of the members of moderate-sized ACLS societies said they were independent scholars and another 8.2% worked for nonacademic organizations.

About 72% of employed Ph.D. sociologists and 83% of the 1997 Ph.D. cohort work in higher educational institutions. Thus, sociology remains a highly academic discipline and, despite the darkening prospects for tenure-track appointments, the great majority of recent sociology Ph.D.s state that, in graduate school, they received little or no encouragement to pursue nonacademic careers. Footnotes, the American Sociological Association newsletter, has occasionally published information on local independent scholar groups; the ASA director has written letters of introduction to libraries for unaffiliated members; for a time, an independent sociologist was a member of the ASA Committee on Employment. But the problems of independent (as distinct from nonacademic) sociologists do not rank high among ASA concerns. There are simply too few of them. When James Bennett sought to interview forty independent sociologists, he could not find enough and had to add anthropologists to reach his target.

There should be relatively more independent anthropologists, as anthropology’s emphasis on qualitative methods makes individual observation and interviews more acceptable than they are in quantitative- and survey-minded sociology. Perhaps 10% of the American Anthropological Association’s 7,400 non-student members are engaged in nonacademic research and consulting; the Society for Applied Anthropology and National Association for the Practice of Anthropology
(NAPA), with over 2,000 and 700 members respectively, are devoted to applied and policy work (conducted, of course, by faculty as well as nonacademics). AAA has established a task force (conducted, of course, by faculty as well as nonacademics). AAA has established a task force devoted to applied and policy work.

Independent Scholar Associations

There have been two national organizations of independent scholars: the Academy of Independent Scholars (AIS) and the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS). The brainchild of University of Colorado economists Kenneth Boulding and Lawrence Senesh, the AIS was formed in 1979 with the central purpose of serving prominent retired faculty. Its mainly male membership, which rose to a peak of 400, represented a very wide range of fields and professions: social scientists, scientists, humanists, writers, doctors, businessmen, administrators (Jacques Barzun, Norman Borlaug, Erik Erikson, Arthur Flemming, John Kenneth Galbraith, Garrett Hardin, Alfred Kazin, Clark Kerr, Rollo May, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, Jonas Salk, Glenn Seaborg, George Seldes, Gilbert White). Initially, members were elected and selecting persons "of demonstrated originality and creativity" could be contentious. The end of compulsory retirement weakened the Academy's thrust: younger members were invited and election yielded to recruitment and requests for donations.

The Academy encouraged members with common interests to exchange ideas and information. It administered members' grants and, for a fee, arranged for speaking invitations, proposal critiques, and the review, editing, and publication of manuscripts. It organized colloquia and meetings between senior scholars and high school students and teachers; participated in Elderhostel and Fulbright educational programs; worked on a new social science school curriculum; and applied for countless grants. AIS brochures and proposals spoke of "knowledge ... useful in non-academic settings."

The National Coalition of Independent Scholars was organized in 1989 by representatives of local scholars' groups formed during the preceding decade chiefly in university centers near the two coasts (San Francisco, San Diego, Cambridge, New Haven, Princeton, Durham/Chapel Hill). Composed predominantly of women with humanities Ph.D.s but without secure academic positions, their sometimes strong feminist views gradually abated. Despite resentment at their exclusion from the academic fold, the groups might meet on campus, benefited from its resources, and were helped by academic spouses and friends.

NCIS membership increased from 69 at the outset to 280 in 1994, fell and rose thereafter, and was still 280 in 2001. Three-fourths of members have a Ph.D.; two-thirds are women; an uncertain fraction hold part-time, adjunct, or associate scholar positions; at least 35 have an "edu" e-mail address. Members' chief fields are history, literary studies, art history, and women's studies followed by biography, philosophy, and anthropology, with smaller numbers in other humanities and social sciences.

About 520 persons belong to ten loosely affiliated local scholars' groups. Though leaders of these groups established NCIS and dominated its board, only 60 persons belong to both NCIS and an affiliated group. Many NCIS members have no group in their vicinity; local meetings can yield friendships and personal help less attainable from NCIS; most groups have casual and NCIS, stricter (if not entirely clear) membership rules and practices. A member of the first board resigned to pro-

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test the requirement that members offer evidence of scholarly purpose, yet what that “evidence” should be has been seriously disputed. So has the definition of “independent”: one NCIS president would even open membership to tenured faculty.

With $20,000 annual revenue, the NCIS’s only staff is a part-time accountant. It relies on the labor and expenditures of volunteers who can’t be compelled to do anything and may quit if they feel thwarted or find thankless labor less rewarding than their own research. NCIS has suffered from the abrupt withdrawal of key members; from the lack of resources, administrative experience, significant services, and a scholarly journal; from the instability of its board, the great dispersion of members’ interests and competencies, and the difficulty of identifying and concentrating on a few achievable goals. Nonetheless, NCIS demonstrates that, with little money, devoted volunteers can accomplish a good deal. It has issued a quarterly newsletter for 15 years; held six national conferences; become an American Council of Learned Societies affiliate; sports an august, if unused, advisory committee; and operates a useful website (www.ncis.org). Individual members have become recognized spokesmen for independent scholars in several major societies.

Independent scholars would like many things: fuller acceptance by learned societies and inclusion in their meetings, councils, and publications; fair consideration by funding bodies, publishers, and journal editors; a friendlier reception by university libraries and departments; wider recognition of their existence, needs, and scholarship. I will discuss two points of perpetual concern: access to research funds and research libraries.

**Government Agencies**

From the thin information readily available about most grant programs, little can be gleaned beyond the eligibility of independent applicants and whether they receive awards. Their qualifications, the quality of their proposals, unstated criteria and methods governing awards, the background and outlook of staff and reviewers—in short, how fairly they are treated—are unknown or determinable only after prolonged inquiry. A 1994 General Accounting Office inquiry throws, or threw, light on the review systems of the National Science Foundation (NSF), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), but not, explicitly, on their treatment of unaffiliated applicants.

GAO found that reviewers from leading universities were underrepresented at NSF and NIH. The agencies barred reviewers from evaluating proposals from their own institution or in which they had a financial interest, but did little, besides adjuring objectivity, to address intellectual conflicts. In some programs, applicants can name individuals they would like to, or not to, evaluate their proposals.

The fundamental purpose of strengthening scientific, medical, or humanistic institutions and education weighs their expenditures toward institutions and affiliated individuals. Even when unaffiliated individuals are eligible, the criterion of “adequate institutional resources” can hurt them. GAO detected a “halo effect,” in which proposals from prominent departments received higher ratings: “even if the applicant is not well known, reviewers may infer that he or she is likely to use the grant productively just because a prestigious department has demonstrated its own confidence by hiring the individual.”

For this inquiry, I looked at a few NSF programs that might receive proposals from independent scholars: the history and philosophy of science, science and technology studies, and cultural anthropology.

Nine years ago, independent scholars comprised a fifth, and currently are a smaller proportion, of applicants and grantees in the history and philosophy of science. NSF has given nearly $500,000 for travel grants to help graduate students and independent scholars attend annual meetings of the History of Science Society and three related societies over a five-year period.

Six independent scholars have current grants from the science and technology studies program. “The quality of their work is no different than academics. We don’t see them in any different light, they have no higher hurdle to clear. In many cases they have a better situation,” says program director Bruce Seely. “We consider them an important constituency; they have contributed substantially to the field.”

Of 125 cultural anthropology grants active in October 2001, not one went to an independent anthropologist. Many grants support research for doctoral dissertations; anthropologists conducting applied research would not normally apply for, or receive, grants from this basic research program: “a nonacademic wouldn’t have the purity to talk to NSF,” a prominent applied anthropologist said scornfully. The few independent anthropologists who apply, program director Stuart
Plattner states, “would have a very hard time getting a grant” because of the difficulty of arranging for institutional review board (IRB) approval of their proposed research. Other NSF staff have advised independent applicants to obtain a nominal institutional affiliation for this purpose. As the program officer can determine whether IRB approval is necessary — can even organize an ad hoc IRB review — the officer’s judgment and readiness to act on it, are decisive. He can present the applicant with an obstacle or help to surmount it.

“Nominal affiliation” converts an independent applicant from an oddball case causing trouble and potential grief to a routine case handled by routine procedures. The government bureaucracy that processes grants is, as faculty often bemoan, matched by a university bureaucracy that should ease the task of complying with government regulations. Lacking a bureaucracy of their own, independent scholars are like foreigners trying to enter the grant country without a passport or visa.

When, a couple years ago, NSF instituted a “fastlane” Internet system that expedited applications by using a code number for a file of basic institutional information, an independent scholar warned that it might frustrate unaffiliated applicants. Completing the form is fairly simple, yet some unaffiliated scholars, who, an observer remarked, “are like the philosopher in the tree — nonworldly wise,” were stymied. Some had no computer. Concerned program directors arranged, if necessary, to waive the fastlane requirement. In time, the problem dissipated. NSF merely assigned a number to unaffiliated applicants, who, by specifying social security and tax deductions for themselves and any research assistants, became, in effect, one-person institutions.

A “nominal” affiliation is, and is not, nominal. To an academic administrator, such an appointment, as a research fellow or adjunct professor, is nominal because it is overtly costless and may even net a sum in overhead. To the scholar, it can be invaluable, enabling him to apply for grants and, if successful, to serve as a principal investigator. Only selected scholars, vetted and approved by a professor, department head, and/or dean, enjoy the privilege. In the sciences, thousands of post-doctoral graduates conducting government-funded research may, like ghost writers, draft proposals and reports without signing them or serving as principal investigators.

Did any independent anthropologists with nominal institutional affiliations receive anthropology grants? It is difficult to extract this information from NSF: of 26 principal investigators for whom it was provided, five (19%) held ad-hoc research positions. If a similar proportion obtains in other fields, NSF is sustaining on campus an army of research personnel without tenure-line appointments.

The status of unaffiliated applicants at the National Institutes of Health is unclear. A rule about the importance of “institutional resources” in evaluating proposals plainly hurts their chances. I discussed the eligibility of independent applicants with grant policy staff and directors of likely programs. They were courteous and patient with what they deemed a puzzling, obtuse, or intriguing question. Most said, “No,” such applicants were not eligible for grants; veterans said “Yes,” though such cases were rare.

NIH policy states, “In general, NIH grants may be awarded to organizations [my italics] that are domestic or foreign, public or private, or nonprofit or for-profit.” Though “organization” is “a generic term used to refer to an educational institution or other entity, including an individual,” an individual, an official said, refers solely to certain fellowships. Applicants must be affiliated with an institution that “will take full legal responsibility” for meeting NIH financial and other requirements; the institution, not NIH, determines if an individual may submit a proposal and serve as a principal investigator. Independent anthropologists funded to investigate social and cultural factors affecting illness and health usually affiliate with a nonprofit or for-profit group.

In addition to accounting for funds and avoiding financial conflicts, NIH grantees must, when appropriate, provide assurance of the ethical and safe conduct of their research; the confidentiality of patient records; the observance of animal welfare rules; the inclusion of women, minorities, and children in research; and — an obligation whose witless enforcement plagues social scientists and even historians — the protection of human subjects. Staff who insist that grants must go to institutions point to these assurances, commonly given by institutional representatives; to the application form’s specification of adequate equipment and facilities “available to and under the control of each party”; and, an official volunteered, “the benefits of talking with colleagues and graduate students.”

Clearly, it is difficult for a scientist bereft of an institution to hack a way through NIH regulations. It is so unusual that many program directors think
it impossible. Nevertheless, it has happened and can still happen. At the National Institute of Mental Health, a longtime staff member recalled, an individual grantee would be bonded and checks would go to his bank. A small National Library of Medicine program demonstrates that NIH can indeed award funds to individuals. It awards 10 to 12 grants a year for scholarly projects in the history of medicine, the life sciences, medical research, health services; for biomedical handbooks, atlases, databases, translations, symposia. Most grants go to academics but independent scholars receive a few. "Some don't know of the program—it's hard to reach them," program director Susan Sparks says.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) also awards most of its funds to institutions, not individuals, though nonacademic scholars may benefit as participants in some grants. Support of "research and original scholarship" is but one of the Endowment's purposes; others are to: preserve cultural resources, promote "lifelong learning," school and college education, "the institutional base of the humanities," and make the humanities "accessible" to all Americans. The last is served by politically influential state humanities councils, which, in 2000, received $30.6 million of NEH's $100 million budget. As the councils' funds have for ten years held at a $29-$32 million level while the NEH budget fell $60 million from its peak, the funds for scholarly research have shrunk markedly. Congress is less enamored of scholarship than are scholars.

From 5%-20% of fellowships for college teachers and independent scholars, stipends for summer research, and stipends to attend NEH-funded seminars and institutes go to nonacademics. Their success rate tends to be lower than that of faculty. Though NEH recruits nonacademic scholars to review proposals, most reviewers are academics. NEH notices and forms may be aimed mainly at academics: the notice of an NEH seminar for college teachers mentions only college teachers; an application question about "salary replacement" is plainly not designed for an unsalaried scholar.

Despite such obstacles, NEH staff, unlike most NIH staff, seem conscious of, and sympathetic to, independent applicants. Former NEH Directors William Bennett and Lynne Cheney asked the staff to seek out nonacademic scholars (perhaps thinking them less politically correct), but they were hard to find. Their proposals are often poor and out of touch with recent developments; "quite a few ... [are] bizarre," an independent panelist said. "We're the last bastion of merit selection" and "extremely interested in a level playing field," an NEH official says. When different types of scholars compete, these goals can conflict. Independent scholar Bruce King criticized the grouping of independent scholars with college teachers as "almost insulting," but its purpose was to shelter weaker applicants (including those from 2-year and black colleges) who could not compete with university faculty. In 1993, a grant program for independent scholars was evidently contemplated. Asked for its opinion, the National Coalition of Independent Scholars board rejected the idea on the grounds that independent scholars should not be "ghettoized": a triumph of principle over practical sense.

The Fulbright Scholars Program, which offers U.S. scholars fellowships to lecture and conduct research for 2 to 12 months in 130 countries, embraces a very wide range of fields and awardees. Applications are invited from university, college, and junior college faculty and administrators; independent scholars; professionals in business, government, and private practice: artists, journalists, lawyers, psychologists, librarians, social workers, law enforcement officials, and others. Of 825 awards from 1999-2000 to 2001-2002, academic faculty and administrators received 90%, but professional, adjunct faculty, and independent scholar candidates were relatively more successful (about 39% won awards compared to 33% of faculty). State Department and Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES) staff, who help to administer the program, would like more independent applicants, especially for locations where, an official says, "we are short of good people." In the last three years, only 47 applied: 22 (47%) won awards, the best record in any general competition I have noted. "[W]e welcome applications from independent scholars, visiting faculty and adjuncts," CIES's Judy Pehrson writes. "We are actually doing special outreach to these groups—direct mail and ads in publications we feel reach them (Adjunct Advocate, for example)." But, the State Department official says with a touch of frustration, "It's not easy to find them."

Foundations

Few private foundations have developed the sort of bureaucratic apparatus by which government research funds are administered. Few fund
Vice President Peter Kardon says it is simpler to make grants to individuals except through the Carnegie Corporation "does not generally make grants to individuals, except through the Carnegie Scholars Program," its web site states. "We believe individual scholarship is an important asset in our democratic process," says President Vartan Gregorian, who instituted this program in 1999. Scholars receive up to $100,000 a year for two years' research in broad policy areas that interest Carnegie, such as education and campaign reform, terrorism, international development, conflict resolution. Of 16 scholars named in 2001, 15 were at universities; one, Jeff Faux, was president of the Washington-based Economic Policy Institute.

Foundations with fellowship programs or grants to individuals often entertain applications from independent scholars. Indeed, some programs are so broad, including journalists, writers, artists, directors, architects, photographers, musicians, social activists, inventors, and yet others, their boundaries are elusive. The MacArthur Foundation "genius" awards of $100,000 a year for five years are an example. As in the Nobel and Carnegie Scholar awards, applications are not accepted; awardees are nominated by consultants and selected by judges. In two recent years, 28 of the 48 MacArthur awards went to university faculty and 20 to individuals at museums, institutes, and advocacy groups plus a cartoonist, choreographer, radio producer, playwright, pianist, artist, writers. Not one appeared to be both a scholar and independent; the closest was biographer Jean Strouse.

Foundations and government agencies that deal mainly with institutions say it is tedious to administer and difficult to account for small grants to individuals. But it can be easier to award fellowships than grants. Guggenheim Foundation Vice President Peter Kardon says it is simpler to track fellowship funds: "we do not need grants management software, just a bare accounting program." Guggenheim asks its fellows to report how funds were spent only because the Internal Revenue Service requires it. Many Guggenheim fellowships—they averaged about $36,000 in 2000—go to faculty on sabbatical; others, to artists, writers, composers, film-makers, etc. who may also be part-time faculty; in 2001, five or six of 177 fellowships went to independent scholars. A few years ago, it was charged that, in the humanities, awards favored faculty at prominent universities. President Joel Conarroe acknowledged that "Most ... applicants in the humanities have faculty appointments" but denied any discrimination against independent humanists. "Our advisers ... look only for merit."

All that can readily be learned about foundation awards is the recipient, amount, and broad purpose. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation offers brief, comparable information about one-year grants of $210 million to the Gates Cambridge Trust and $10,000 to the National Academy of Sciences. Greater insight is the recipient, amount, and broad purpose. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation offers brief, comparable information about one-year grants of $210 million to the Gates Cambridge Trust and $10,000 to the National Academy of Sciences. Greater insight into a foundation's selection practices requires detailed information that is private or difficult to compile. The relative ability of different applicants, the quality of their proposals, and their relevance to foundation objectives cannot be judged from public sources.

Libraries

Independent scholars often complain about the difficulty of getting adequate library services, especially interlibrary loans and access to electronic databases. For more than a decade, improving library access has been an objective of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars, yet little concrete progress has been made; a few local groups have secured courtesy cards at nearby universities. Doreen Valentine, president of the Princeton Research Forum, an independent scholars group, writes, "full-access privileges on par with our institutional peers are not available ... independent scholars are at a distinct and unfair disadvantage when it comes to carrying out research." This experience underlies the resolutions, adopted by leading humanities associations, urging university libraries to give independent scholars fuller access to their collections and services. Contrariwise, James Bennett (whose work preceded the massive growth of electronic sources) concluded that, one way or another—the help of a spouse, paying for access, receiving it as a courtesy, picking a topic with accessible sources—most inde-
ependent scholars got the library services they needed. Plainly, the experience of individual scholars varies with their location, needs, professional standing, personal contacts, and specific libraries.

State universities are generally more open to outside readers, particularly state residents, than private institutions. For example, any visitor can use the collections, stacks, and all electronic databases in the main library of the University of Maryland. The catalog, but not databases, can also be searched from home. Alumni can secure borrowing privileges and interlibrary loans for $50, others for $100, a year.

At Johns Hopkins, visitors can use the collections and electronic databases on the premises. Borrowing privileges (excluding interlibrary loan) cost alumni $100 a year and others, $200. Remote access to databases is reserved for faculty and students. Librarians would like to offer alumni remote access but cannot, because of vendor contract provisions. At Yale’s Sterling Memorial Library the situation is similar. A visitor can register, use the reference and periodical rooms, electronic sources, and ten books an hour, but cannot enter the stacks. A stack pass costs $10 a day, $27 a month; borrowing privileges, $195 for a minimum of three-months or $780 a year—$150 for alumni. Remote access is confined to faculty and students.

Jack Siggins, librarian at George Washington University’s Gelman Library, explains some of the complexities of access to this downtown Washington library. It may be used by faculty and students at any member institution of the Association of Research Libraries. D.C. residents with a “legitimate” research need, and neighborhood residents. An independent scholar can use special collections and, for $100, the general collection but not all electronic databases; borrowing privileges cost $250 a year. “Restrictions on access are common among university libraries in urban areas,” Siggins says. A few years ago, the library was more open but nearby “companies, law firms, institutions, and government agencies ... abused the free-access privilege by dominating use of our resources to such an extent that students and faculty could not get to our computers, books, and journals.” The law and medical libraries have their own admission rules and restrictions on access to expensive databases detailed in vendor contracts.

More reluctant than George Washington University to limit public access, the library of an urban public institution can be open to anyone—and be a poor place to work. At the City College of New York and Rutgers’ Camden campus, library computers can be so monopolized by students from other campuses and youngsters engaged in private e-mail and pornographic entertainment that the institution’s own students and faculty can use them only at times when public access is restricted.

Scholars with limited needs may try public libraries. In Portland, Ore., they evidently provide superior interlibrary loans and on-site access to significant databases. Commonly, however, they concentrate on popular periodical and reference databases, leaving academic (print or electronic) sources to academic libraries. La Salle University (Philadelphia) librarian John Bak T says that academic libraries hesitate to lend to public libraries, which “often have very poor control over their patrons” and may lose a book or return it late or damaged.

A growing volume of literary, historical, and reference works, newspapers and periodicals, government reports, and archival sources is available on the Internet free or for a fee. Several states (Connecticut, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan) have made basic databases available to all residents and certain academic databases, to all higher educational institutions in the state. Increasingly, professional journals offer subscribers, free or for a fee, access to an electronic edition and back files. Questia, a commercial vendor catering to high-school and college students, offers electronic access to 60,000 copyright articles and books for $150 a year and per-page copying charges. Harvard Business School graduates can get remote access to designated databases for $300 a year. However, full off-site access by alumni to library databases is opposed by vendors as bypassing their direct sales to customers: e.g., off-site access to law, medical, or chemical databases would threaten their sales to law firms, hospitals, and chemical companies.

For an independent scholar, the best solution is an appointment as adjunct professor, research associate, or associate scholar with accompanying off-site access and library privileges on campus and, often, at other institutions. Typically, after such an appointment, the library will issue the identification card and password needed for on- and off-site services.

A couple of decades ago, several professional associations encouraged departments to extend courtesy appointments to unemployed scholars. In 1977, the American Philosophical Association recommended that, “because of the continuing
academic job crisis ... anyone with graduate training or scholarly research in philosophy should be offered "Associate Scholar" status. Unemployed senior philosophers who wish to maintain activities to the academic community should apply for "Associate Fellow" status as the professional equal of departmental colleagues. Both positions would confer "full library privileges" and participation in certain department activities. Today, a variety of scholars benefit from these appointments: fresh Ph.D.s engaged in research, academically qualified faculty spouses, unemployed professionals, retired faculty who move to a new area. But their award to independent scholars seems to have gone out of fashion. It would be an act of collegiality to revive them.

Discussion

The significance of independent scholars can be judged by their number and/or the value of their work. Defined strictly, as productive, unaffiliated faculty who move to a new area. But their award to independent scholars seems to have gone out of fashion. It would be an act of collegiality to revive them.

The (intellectual or social) value of their work is, like that of academics, high, ordinary, and low. Protagonists point to prominent or influential figures of yesteryear: Henry Adams, W.E.B. Du Bois, Charles S. Peirce, Lewis Mumford, Kenneth Burke, Edmund Wilson; before their frequent move to academia, to "New York intellectuals" like Alfred Kazin, Clement Greenberg, Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, Paul Goodman, Irving Howe, Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell; to writers like Rachel Carson, Jane Jacobs, and Daniel P. Moynihan, who kicked up public policy storms.

It is more difficult to name comparable current figures. Those who come most readily to mind are not primarily scholars but successful nonfiction writers and biographers like Justin Kaplan, David McCullough, David Halberstam, Robert Caro, Nicholas Lemann. The difference between writers and scholars of history, Lemann observes, is that writers are weak and scholars strong on archival sources, historiography, previous academic work, and "the important unresolved questions": writers have an eye for "the story," a topic "obviously relevant to the present day," a "narrative structure" and anecdotes that interest a general audience. The central obligations of scholars are a scrupulous regard for evidence and interpretation and a fair acknowledgment and treatment of fellow scholars (and, a cynic may add, a vocabulary intelligible only to initiates of their disciplinary cult). Once upon a time, a scholar might also be an intellectual and an evocative writer; these days, the talents are often compartmentalized: Hannah Arendt was a scholar/intellectual, not a writer; Dwight Macdonald was, and Daniel Moynihan is, more an intellectual/writer than scholar. George Woodcock, the very independent Canadian writer, biographer, and historian, thought the word scholar was too narrow; he was a knowledgeable man of letters who strove "to make every task a piece of first-class prose."

When I asked spokesmen for several scholarly associations to name nationally prominent independent scholars in their field, some declined: Russell McCormmach (Night Thoughts of a Classical Physicist, Cavendish: Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences) was cited for "very important work in the history of physics"; others named respectable but not leading figures. The National Coalition of Independent Scholars Membership Directory for 2001 lists few names that would be recognized by readers of The New York Review of Books or, for that matter, PMLA or The American Historical Review; Pulitzer-prize winner Richard Rhodes, author of The Making of the Atomic Bomb and Black Sun, and Robert Kanigel (now on the MIT faculty), biographer of Ramanujan and Frederick Winslow Taylor, may be the best known; other members are reputable, if less prominent: anthropologists Erika Bourguignon and Joan Cassell, biographers Anne Conover Carson and Gillian Gill, literary scholar Gloria Erlich, historians Karen Offen and Alice Marquis, art historian Claire Sherman, Omni-writer Richard Kostelanetz. Former members include Derek Walcott biographer Bruce King and Kepler translator and publisher William Donahue, whose Green Lion Press also publishes Euclid, Vesalius, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and other science classics. Members' books are most often published by small, sometimes subsidized, presses and firms like Greenwood, Scarecrow, McFarland, Praeger, Garland, University Press of America; often, by minor academic presses; less often by major academic and trade presses (among which Yale, Stanford, Cam-
bridge, and Macmillan stand out). Another block of members have produced nothing readily accessible: an agency report, an entry in a compendium, a book review or bibliography, self-published poems, a monograph issued by a quaint press with an exotic name.

In competing for awards, independent scholars generally do less well than academics (the Fulbright program is a notable exception). There can be twenty reasons for this other than the quality of each group or, as some quickly charge, discrimination. The isolated scholar is less informed about new intellectual trends and funding agency interests, less experienced at writing proposals, less able to discuss them with informed colleagues, less likely to have prominent references. Of course, he has no institutional stationery. Richard Kostelanetz writes caustically: "Re NEH and Guggenheim .... my experience is that references from independents count for nothing with judges, who read only letterheads." (If so, academics from obscure institutions do no better on this score.)

Academics are so numerous and their institutions play so vital a role in the scholarly world that most agencies awarding scholarly grants or fellowships deal mainly with them. In some fields, other institutions can play a substantial role: e.g., museums in art, archeology, ethnology, paleontology, natural history; think tanks in social, economic, and military policy; physicians, hospitals, drug companies, and private laboratories in medical research. But, by definition, independent scholars are attached to no institutions. The programs, forms, and regulations of funding agencies are in large measure prepared for academics and their institutions; agency staff and advisers are drawn from the same institutions. If not excluded by a refusal to deal with individuals, independent scholars can be excluded de facto by normal agency procedures and expectations. It is simply preposterous that, one year, the National Institutes of Health will award a large research grant to a senior professor and, the next year, after he has cut his ties with the campus, deem him incapable of conducting research. NIH has grown too huge to operate as Warren Weaver once did at the Rockefeller Foundation, giving modest sums to carefully selected scientists who often founded new fields of biology.

Not infrequently, it is argued that independent scholars are not as "good" as academics, because, if they were, they would have academic appointments. That reasoning is too circular to require rebuttal. Independent scholars, for their part, have argued that, free of institutional shackles, they can do original work—as if the security of tenure shackles the mind. Robert Graves, the model of an isolated writer, claimed that "to be a critic one must contrive to be independent .... As soon as .... one links oneself to a university ... one's liberty to think properly is impaired." However, when Irving Howe or Daniel Bell linked themselves to a university, their thinking was in no way impaired. Sycophancy is an aspect of character, not institutional location. The crack about "a herd of independent minds" referred to independent intellectuals. Insofar as intellectual fashion or disciplinary doctrine limit the ideas that a professional association, journal, press, or funding agency tolerates, academic and nonacademic scholars are subject to the same limits. Indeed, independent scholar Eugenia Kaledin observes, "the insecurity of the outsider more often makes our writing too academic."

The only claim that need be made for independent scholars is the same that is made for academics: those who are serious do what they can to advance our knowledge and understanding. Those who succeed perform a service to scholarship and, at times, to society. They deserve a fair chance to succeed and it would cost the agencies that support research and scholarship relatively little to provide that chance.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS


Harold Orleans, a former editor of The Independent Scholar, writes a column on scholarly developments for Change. McFarland has just published his latest book, T. E. Lawrence, Biography of a Broken Hero. He thanks Kathryn Orleans, Jennifer Swift-Krmaer, and Georgia Wright for their helpful comments.