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THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES OF THE AMERICAS

*** SSILA BULLETIN ***

An Information Service for SSILA Members

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Number 34-A: May 2, 1996

RETRACTION OF SSILA BULLETIN 34.7

* Paul Chapin--the Program Director for Linguistics at NSF--has sent us
* the following response to the posting in yesterday's SSILA Bulletin
* about the "Threat to NSF Funding for Linguistics and Anthropology"
* (SSILA BULLETIN 34.7). Since the truth is so much at variance with
* the alarming situation portrayed by Gary Chapman in the message that
* we reprinted, we think that Paul's clarification deserves immediate
* transmission before unfounded rumors spread. We apologize for having
* passed along so erroneous a report, and hereby retract item 34.7.

May 1, 1996

Dear Colleagues,

The posting from Gary Chapman, reprinted in today's (May 1) SSILA Bulletin, is being widely circulated. I have now received it from several people. The first one came as quite a surprise, as it was the first I had heard of such a claim as Chapman was making, so I had to check it out and see if there was anything to it. I forwarded it to my Division Director (the SBER Division Director, who should be the first to know about these things). He hadn't heard it either, so checked with the NSF Congressional Liaison people. Thus my response here represents the best information NSF has, which is that the report is incorrect.

Our guess is that the factual basis of the report was an event which did take place on April 24 -- the House of Representatives authorization committee responsible for NSF reported out an authorization bill for NSF which instructed NSF to reduce its number of Directorates from seven to six. Last year's House authorization bill for NSF had the same instruction, and added "report language" (not in the bill itself, but in the commentary accompanying the bill) hinting that the Directorate removed should be Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences. As far as we know, there is no comparable report language accompanying this year's bill, as yet at least, although it may well be that that is what Rep. Walker, Chair of the committee, has in mind.

Now this event is significantly different from Chapman's report in a couple of ways. First, the reference in last year's report language (which may or may not be repeated this year) was to the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate*, NOT to the Division for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Research as reported. I understand that this may be an obscure distinction to people in the world outside, but within NSF it's an important one. While it would still be troubling for the SBE Directorate to be disestablished as an internal NSF organizational unit, this is a very different thing from "eliminating the SBER Division" as reported. Even if the committee's action were to become law, it would mean an internal NSF reorganization in which the SBER Division would continue as part of some other Directorate, not be eliminated.

Second, while anything is possible from Congress, last year's experience makes it appear quite unlikely that the committee's action will in fact become law. An authorization bill has to pass both the House and the Senate, and then have any differences between the two bodies ironed out in a conference committee, the conference report pass the two bodies again, and then be signed by the President, before it becomes law. The Senate has shown no interest in endorsing the NSF reorganization urged by the House committee. In fact the Senate did not even pass an authorization bill for NSF last year, and may not this year either (in which case NSF's appropriation carries its own authorization).

So while we do very much appreciate the attention and concern for SBER reflected in the report, and hope that people will continue to monitor the situation in Congress carefully, in this case I believe the alarm is misplaced. If people do choose to write to their representatives in the Congress, it's important for their letters to reflect a correct understanding of the actual situation.

--Paul Chapin, NSF

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