How independent can an independent scholar truly be?

Editors' note: We devote this issue of the newsletter to revisiting the meaning of scholarship. Prompted by an exchange between Robert Thimmesh and the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (see Thimmesh's editorial on page 2) and an account by MISF member Rhoda Lewin of the first NCIS Conference, which she attended last April, we have added our own thoughts on the meaning of scholarship.

What is scholarship? Must it, as the application for membership in for the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS) implies, be demonstrated by publication or academic achievement? Or, as the procedure for membership in the Minnesota Independent Scholars Forum (MISF) reads, is the desire to do inquiry and the willingness to pay the dues sufficient qualification for membership? Between these two answers lies the territory covered by both Thimmesh and Lewin in their respective articles.

The NCIS and MISF have similar names and similar origins. They exist as alternatives to the university setting in which many scholars eventually locate. They both began as places for unaffiliated Ph. D.'s to "find themselves" when there began not to be enough spaces in the academy. The MISF began in 1983, NCIS in 1989 as a coalition of older, longer established groups. To join NCIS one must demonstrate "scholarly purpose. (A graduate degree may serve as indication of scholarly purpose but is not necessary.)" [quote from membership information distributed by NCIS]

NCIS will not even accept dues from those who do not demonstrate "indications of scholarly purpose."

The fact that NCIS members are mostly, if not entirely, Ph.D.'s seems to give a particular flavor to the organization. A reading of the Independent Scholar (Vol. VII, No. 3), published after the recent conference, suggests that many NCIS members are putting the "best spin" on what they consider to be a bad break. For example, the keynote speaker, Gloria Erlich of the Princeton Research Forum, described her evolution from thinking of herself as "an unemployed Ph.D." to thinking of herself as an "independent scholar" as a conversion from a negative identity to a positive one. However, she continued:

let me not get carried away—no one really envies my marginality, my self-questionings, or my lack of financial self-sufficiency.

In effect, NCIS has put the emphasis on the scholar in the phrase "independent scholar" and appears to view independence as a kind of purgatory.

... NCIS has put the emphasis on the 'scholar' in the phrase 'independent scholar'

By contrast MISF tends to emphasize, if not revel in, independence. In the course of its somewhat longer life and probably as a result of having to define itself as something more than a club for un-employed Ph.D.'s in order to get a 501 (c) (3) designation, MISF has developed a fairly broad definition of independent scholarship. The MISF has never imposed the necessity of an advanced degree or even demonstration of scholarly purpose for membership. The membership of MISF is therefore more diverse than that of NCIS. In a (continued on page 5)

Inside this issue...

• NCIS meets in Washington, a report......page 3
• Musical 'Love Affair' set for November 14.....page 3
• Annual meeting, December 4....page 3
President's Message
by Robert Thimmesh

I wish to talk about independent scholars and speculate on why we desire to be associated with a group called MISF. These thoughts are prompted, in part, by letter of inquiry I received from Harold Orland, the new editor of the Independent Scholar, the quarterly national publication for independent scholars. Harold is responding to a comment I made in a questionnaire sent out by the national group seeking information about independent scholars' groups around the country not formally affiliated with the national group, groups such as ours. I stated (with the Board's concurrence) that I thought the national group (NCIS) had an excessively narrow focus which excludes independents, and that they did not seem to have an independent approach to scholarship.

Insofar as our discussion of scholarship and scholars is usually done in the context of the American university system it seems appropriate, perhaps necessary, to consider independent scholars in relation to this context. It seems to me that an independent scholar may be independent institutionally, culturally, and methodologically. Institutional independence usually hinges on employment—whether or not one is employed by a university or college. Methodology is about doing scholarly research and writing—accepting, and using, those standard scholarly methods which have been accepted and institutionalized by academia. Culture encompasses the overarching system of values through which we assess the methodology, the standards, and the institutions. This value system may become self-referential by introspectively examining the culture and its values.

Independent scholars may work for a university, and they may use many (perhaps all) of the methodologies used by the academy. I believe independent scholars are distinguished from academic scholars primarily along cultural lines, by the values adhered to and believed in. (I am not talking about those scholars who may be marking time on their journey to academia by joining an independent scholars' group, but who in their hearts subscribe to the academy's values.) It seems to me that independents differ (thus making concrete the label "independent") from academics by accepting and utilizing scholarly methodology outside the standardized canon institutionalized by the academy, and by explicit recognition that beliefs and values, including feelings and other emotional states, play an important part in scholarship and the pursuit of truth.

I do not think the academy's pursuit of truth is wrong, but that their pursuit is not the whole story, contrary to the academy's beliefs. The academy is generally uncomfortable talking about beliefs, theirs or others', unless it is a "rational analysis" of belief; they do not like to accept the reality of belief on its own terms. Thus the Forum welcomes artists and writers, two groups not usually considered to be scholars by the academy, as well as others who consider themselves to be scholars. The idea of scholarship is an open concept, in a constant state of change and evolution. We are reluctant to impose boundaries, which tend to be exclusive by definition, and we like to believe that scholarship is where you find it, sometimes in surprising places. This approach tends to be inclusive.

It may be objected that such an inclusive approach, because it imposes no standards of scholarship, includes a lot of second-rate work. This may be true, but all of the work should be evaluated on its merits without a priori assumptions that a work will be inferior before the work is examined. Adopting standards is no guarantee of superior scholarship—witness the large amount of second-rate scholarship by members of academia. Whether there is a larger amount of second-rate scholarship from independents or from academics is a factual question and a matter of degree. One hurdle faced in deciding this question revolves around defining "second-rate," a question intimately connected with the values brought to the table of analysis.

(continued on page 4)
Program Notes

Dvorák’s ‘Love Affair’ with Minnesota funded by MHC

The MISF has received a mini-grant from the Minnesota Humanities Commission in cooperation with the Minnesota State Legislature and the National Endowment for the Humanities in support of a program to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of Antonín Dvorák’s visit to St. Paul and Minnehaha Falls. This program, entitled “Antonín Dvorák’s Love Affair with Minnesota” will take place at 2 pm, Sunday, November 14, 1993, at the historic Czechoslovakian People’s Society Hall, Western and Michigan Streets in downtown St. Paul. The program is free and open to the public.

Forum members Gloria Morris-Grothe and Lionel Davis will be the presenters. Morris-Grothe, a collector of ethnic songs and a teacher of vocal performers, will demonstrate Dvorák’s Biblical songs (Opus 99) and discuss the American influences they illustrate. Davis, a music-historian, will play portions of Opus 100, sometimes referred to as the Indian Lament. Davis will also discuss the Eight Humoresques for Piano Solo, Opus 101. A group singing of Dvorák’s arrangement of “America” will complete the program.

In the summer of 1893, Dvorák visited St Paul briefly in order to see Minnehaha Falls. The composer had read “Hiawatha” in Czech many years before and hoped to interpret the poem in music. He never did so, but his Opus 100 was based on the sounds of Minnehaha Falls. In St. Paul, the composer was honored at a banquet at the Czech People’s Hall—the very hall in which the MISF meeting will take place.

Annual Meeting Set

The annual meeting of the Minnesota Independent Scholars’ Forum will take place December 4, Saturday, 11 AM to 2:30 PM, in the lower level meeting room at Merriam Park Library, Marshall at Fairview, St. Paul. We may bring dishes to share for lunch; the Forum will provide beverages and plastic plates/cups/forks. After a social/lunch hour (11 am to noon) we will hold our business meeting and election of officers. The program for the afternoon is to nominate a Person of the Millenium. So far candidates nominated include Admiral William James Crowe, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Sir Isaac Newton. The Program Committee would like a brief paragraph about your nominee. Please send your paragraph to Program Chair Ginny Hansen, 2408 Girard Av So, Minneapolis 55405 or call 374-5505.

National IS Coalition Shares How-To on Funds, Publishing, and More

by Rhoda Lewin

April turned out to be travel-time. I attended the Holocaust Museum dedication in Washington DC and a week later I was to be at the annual meeting of the American Jewish Historical Society’s Academic Council in New York City. So when I heard that the first conference of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS) was scheduled for April 23-25 in Chevy Chase, Maryland—the weekend between my two other events—I sent in my registration.

Recognizing the limited funds available to many independent scholars, the organizers chose the dormitory-style 4-H Conference Center in Chevy Chase as their convention site. For only $178, I got the whole convention package, including meals, lodging, and special events.

It was an interesting group. The other seventy-one people who registered ranged, professionally, from professor to administrator to carpenter to a woman who described herself as "as a recipient of a fellowship from a matronial foundation" (aka "housewife" or "homemaker").

Most of the sessions were good-news, feel-good presentations. At the "Federal Grant Programs" panel we learned that about 12% of Fulbright, NEA, and NEH grants go to independent scholars. "The Publishing Scene" and "Grant Writing and Evaluation" were factual and highly encouraging. Oral history figured prominently in "Biographical Perplexities." Other sessions were designed for specific fields, including art historians and translators. Certainly meaningful—for those scholars who have "real jobs" and do "scholarship" in their spare time—were the dinner speakers, Judith Ruderman of Duke University and Gloria Erlich of Princeton, New Jersey.

Ruderman’s “Hang On, I’m Changing!” focused on the sometimes-bleak, sometimes-humorous aspects of her “Jekyll-Hyde” life as a literary scholar working full-time as a university administrator while researching and publishing works on William Styron, Joseph Heller, and D.H. Lawrence.

(continued on page 4)
Member Profile

Barbara Pirie writes from Hawaii...

Dear Scholars,

Aloha! I miss you as I would dearly love to be able to go to the Humanities and Sciences Reading Group or your meetings. I often read something here and then have no one to talk to about it. Frustrating. Most people in Hawaii work more than one job just to pay the bills (housing usually eats up more than half of a family's income), so there isn't time for 'luxuries' like reading groups. Also a one-to one-and-a-half hour commute is considered normal (most businesses are concentrated in the central Honolulu area) and local residents have a love affair with their autos (we have more cars per capita than LA!). Is that because they can't afford a home of their own (we have the highest percentage of renters in the US.)? So much for paradise. Many native Hawaiians are leaving the islands because they cannot afford to raise their families here. I stay because it is reasonably close (a six-hour flight) to Fiji, and I love tropical weather. But not hurricanes—Hurricane Ineke ravaged Kauai, and it will be many years before people and businesses on that island recover...

I have been able to visit with Lucy Smith when we both attended our professional conferences in Banff and Jamaica, and it was good to catch up on some of your activities. I've both refined and expanded my business focus. It is still basically cross-cultural training and consulting—emphasizing how to work effectively with differences (national cultures and the many microcultures that affect us: ethnicity, gender, geography, economics, organizational cultures, etc.) Since I like to relate this to everyday life I am becoming more involved in...areas such as culturally appropriate entrepreneurship, management, conflict resolution, etc. Lately I have added the field of cultural tourism, offering a workshop for individuals who wish to be effective cultural travellers...

One special thing that Hawaii offers is a free International Film Festival. Last year focused on how other cultures see themselves. For me it was a gold mine. I told myself that seeing films was work...

Barbara Pirie's address is 1624-B Anapuni St. Honolulu HI 96822

Thimmesh editorial (continued from page 2)

My comment that the national group was excessively narrow and not particularly independent was focusing on this cultural aspect. It seems to be that they are unduly concerned with having the proper credentials, an exclusionary viewpoint, although they claim advanced degrees are unnecessary as a condition of membership. The national group appears to have adopted the values of the academy, thus distinguishing themselves from the academy primarily by their name and perhaps by their employment.

Now I have no objection to the NCIS' concept of independent scholarship. But it seems to be a limited viewpoint, unable or unwilling to contemplate a broader perspective. It is unfortunate, since not only does NCIS handcuff itself, but the resulting organization tends to look like the academic organization, except that it is not such an institution. It tends to look like a pale imitation of the real thing. ♦

Lewin article (continued from page 3)

Erlich's "The Independent Spirit" began with a panel she chaired at MLA in 1981 on "Academics Outside the Walls: Options for the Independent Scholar" and went on to a witty, informative discourse. Included were remarks about the tax-deductibility of research expenses (including equipment) and scholarly conventions (including NCIS meetings), library access, networks of scholars with similar interests, and "our greatest asset, to have the company of people who know things that you do NOT know."

In all, NCIS is well worth the tax-deductible membership fee (only $20, or $15 for associate members). This includes a subscription to their highly readable and always-helpful newsletter, Independent Scholar. It is filled with wonderful articles like "The Scholarly Snob Goes To Market," "What the Third World Did To My Work" and "The Publishing Scene for Scholars and Serious Writers" as well as book reviews, letters, and the usual lists of meetings and deadlines for articles and presentations. (Ed. Note: On the back of the membership roster, included with this issue of the Forum, we have reproduced a list of Fellowships and Grants taken from the Independent Scholar.)

For more information on NCIS, write to PO Box 5743, Berkeley, CA 94705. ♦
Independent scholar  
(continued from page 1)

paper describing the philosophy of the MISF Program Committee in January 1993, Ginny Hansen wrote

Our members are independent scholars for varied and individually valid reasons...our programming can reflect that we have social-scientists, artists-poets-musicians, and scientists among our members (as other groups tend not to); that we have some extremely credentialed persons who work far afield of "recommended research," and also some who pattern after Buckminster Fuller and Susan Sontag, whom I would also call independent scholars, whatever their "credentials" might be.

The end result here is that many members of MISF would not be accepted for membership in NCIS and many members of NCIS might disdain affiliation with MISF.

To concentrate on membership issues, however, is to miss the point. The NCIS is largely a coastal organization (most of their membership resides on either the East Coast or the West Coast), so we are not competing for membership. The point is more that we are two organizations that might be advancing a common cause. Instead we are complaining about our differences. The discrepancies between these two organizations that could be sharing a common goal suggest that a few thoughts on scholarship might be in order.

These thoughts organize around two focal points. On the one hand we have the question of whether scholarship with presentation but without publication counts as scholarship. In effect NCIS says that it does not; MISF says that it does. This is a variation on the old "does anyone hear the tree falling in the forest?" question, but it raises a host of very important considerations. On the one hand, by its open membership policies MISF has said that inquiry alone is sufficient. On the other hand, MISF does try to replicate some of the aspects of the academy— notably opportunities for publication and collegial discussion—for its members by having public forums on almost any subject that we can find a presenter for and by publishing a newsletter that highlights the writings of our members.

The second broader question raised by our differences with NCIS is very simply the definition of a scholar. It would appear from the way in which the membership categories are designed by NCIS that they have adopted a definition that says that a scholar is one who "has done advanced study in a special field." The MISF prefers a rather broader definition by which a scholar is defined as a person who is engaged in serious inquiry. We are very strong on the idea that not all learning is book-learning: our programs illustrate this range. Speakers have talked about everything from apples to Watteau; about interrelated topics (Pop Art and the Wobblies); and topics that might not be found in the academy at all (History that Hurts: An account of a Voyage from Grand Portage to Ely by Birch bark Canoe and Bateau).

Furthermore, values, in addition to facts, are considered proper areas for inquiry. See Finn Jorgensen's paper on the subject of life-long learning delivered at last year's annual meeting, or consider Philip Regal's paper on "The Brain and the University: Survival with Two Imperfect Organs" in December 1990.

In conclusion it would seem that we are separated from NCIS not only by geography but also by the relative importance our organizations give to the meanings of independence and scholarship.

But what difference does all this make? Not much to NCIS. Even if they could somehow accept all of us they would only double their membership; they would still be a very small organization. The distinctions make more difference to MISF. We are proud of our group, of its cross-disciplinary focus, of its diversity, and of its independence of "academic" restrictions. We are bothered by the fact that a national group does not believe we are scholars. Perhaps the challenge to us is to prove that we really are scholars—as opposed to scholarly want-to-be's. One way in which we could do this is to be a bit more serious about using the Forum newsletter as a medium for publication about our research. Then we could see if publication in the Forum newsletter qualified as "an indication of scholarly purpose...".

After thought

"The question 'What alternative possibilities are there?' is the first step in human progress, in generating new theories, new inventions, new ways of making, acting, cooperating, thinking, and living. To ask this question requires a willingness to break with tradition, to venture out into unknown territory. To answer requires the ability to think up new and fruitful possibilities; that is, it requires imagination." Robert Nozick, The Nature of Rationality, Princeton: 1993.
Op-Ed Page (if you don't fill it, the editors will)

Letter to the editor

We have received the following communication from Kevin Crossley-Holland, moderator of the 'Living North' panel last winter.

Dear Sir,

Oh dear! Ginny Hansen has got the wrong end of the stick. In her defensive and curiously disgruntled "A Rebuttal of Sorts," she appears to think that my suggestions of 'brevity of life expectation' and 'closed community' were directed at Minnesotans. They were not. Let Ms. Hansen look again at my preparatory Topic List and she will see that, like my introductory remarks as moderator of the panel discussion on 'Living North,' it was intended to apply to the northern world at large. I am sure this was perfectly understood by all the other participants.

Yours faithfully,

Kevin Crossley-Holland

Dr. "J" (continued from page 8)

unable to respond to needs. The university, on which most scholars depend in some way for library facilities, research results, and more subtle aspects of quality of life, is now threatened with increasing marginalization—if not extinction—if it does not reform. It must learn for itself the lessons that it has taught to its graduates about teaching, writing, management, and interconnectedness among departments. The days of single disciplines taught by isolated scholars are over.

Try this test. Ask a university departmental staff person what the necessary requirements are for a career in his, or her, discipline. You will most likely hear the following: advanced knowledge of the discipline, publishing, teaching, and managing/repre-

senting one's department. Ask if it's important to take university graduate level courses in the primary discipline: the answer will be yes, with long lists of courses (and reasons). Then ask the difficult question: what formal courses have you taken, at any level, to prepare yourself for the last three items on your career requirement list? You will most likely receive a surprised look, followed by some kind of a statement to the effect that, outside of the major discipline, one just picks up the necessary information (perhaps by osmosis).

Further, ask if important advances have been made in the staff person's discipline in the last ten to twenty years. The answer will be yes, no matter what the discipline, and long lists will be presented. Then ask your second difficult question: Why would anyone act as though no improvements were made in the other disciplines a university staff person lists as career needs?

There are serious errors of logic here, and the general public, without perhaps being able to frame it in words, knows that a problem exists, and that changes are necessary. So does president Nils Hasselmo. The very "corporate style managers" he is being accused of surrounding himself with are, most likely, attentive and successful past students of process management courses taken within the very walls of the University.

As independent scholars we should watch with concern, for the relevance of what we do takes some of its luster from the respect in which the university is held.
Media on Members

Minnesota State Fair: Jill Waterhouse was selected to exhibit in this prestigious juried art show. Her piece entitled "What a Dish!" used fabrics and objects of consumption. Dave Wiggins participated in the development of a touch-screen interactive computer exhibit on the topic of the Mississippi National River & Recreation Area. Dave developed the detailed tour of the St. Anthony Falls area, while other portions of the program were developed by the National Park Service working with ICONOS Communications (Minneapolis).

Stone Arch Bridge restoration: Dave Wiggins, past MISF President and current program manager for the MN Historical Society project at St. Anthony Falls, notes that the bridge may be open for pedestrian and bicycle traffic as early as next fall. The restoration will facilitate a more effective circular pathway for the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Trail. Rhoda Gilman has been working on the texts for the Trail's interpretive markers and kiosks.

Games: 4-D Interactive Company president Dave Megarry reports the release of a new CD-ROM... "USA WARS: WWII"...with the data game Blitz Quiz by Compton's Newmedia.

Board Notes

During the last year, a Coffee House Project was discussed, initiated (with a trial run made by joining MISF speaker/panelists with a University Film Series and the Newman Center Coffee House), and reviewed. Interest remains strong, and a potentially rewarding second venture might include a collaboration with the newly opened "Main Street Theater" at St. Anthony Main. MST is currently receiving program activity requests for use of the theater, which includes coffee house accoutrements as well as a stage and a $25K computerized sound and light system.

The board also reviewed MISF's connections to other independent scholars' groups and the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS), with the result that we find ourselves one of the largest and one of the most diverse groups...by design.

The MISF now has a post office box, monthly balance sheets, and a higher-interest savings account thanks to treasurer Dave Megarry.

Study Groups

A new/old study group, "Communications & Research," is being formed by John Wickre, for those interested in developing or increasing skills in accessing large public-access sources and working with full-text information, on-line modems, Internet, CD-ROMs, Lumina, etc.

The Science/ Humanities study group held their third annual all-day retreat, Saturday, October 23, from 9:30 to 4 at the Hill House. The topic this year was "Models of Reality." They are beginning Science in the New Age (Hess) on November 18. For more information call Ginny Hansen, 374-5055.

Help Wanted

If you would like to help with the editing and production of the Forum newsletter, please contact the editors.
The Last Word

by Dr. "J"

Scholars, independent and otherwise, have reason to concern themselves with University 2000, the plan currently being proposed to provide the infrastructure to improve the University of Minnesota's response to its three principal missions: research, education, and service to the community. The plan does a good job of streamlining the connections between the president and the rest of the University, but it falls short of the kind of complete overhaul that is needed. More work needs to be done to reform the academic departments.

In the last fifteen to twenty years, the university has fallen far behind corporations, city councils, small businesses and, to a lesser extent, state and federal government, in its ability to facilitate the connections between knowledge and information. The dimensions of this problem are especially evident at the departmental level. The basic unit of the University, the department, is all too often operating in a manner that is twenty years out of date. Consider, for example:

- all 20 to 60 or 80 professional staff reporting directly to a chairperson; or
- departments with isolated accounting, purchasing, machine shop, electrical shop, and computer specialists (with no matrix management system set in place to connect, or assist these isolated individuals); or
- promotions based on longevity, or perhaps a publication count, rather than productivity, efficacy, etc. in three or four areas of responsibility; or
- lecturers whose presentations and content are never reviewed, until challenged by the students in the class; or
- the typical production of professional graduates with no training in lecturing or teaching styles

-with no training in management to assist them in their research program or their departmental and University tasks.

-who produce Masters, or Ph.D., theses which have much more in common with a dictionary or thesaurus than a scientific publication.

(Wherein lies the training for editing and publishing?)

If the basic unit of the living body is the cell (as it is), then the basic unit of the university is the department. Without getting too technical, if our cells were organized, (even remotely) like most departments we'd have long since expired. They would be overwhelmed with demands and

(continued on page 6)