

TIS The Independent Scholar

A peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal

www.ncis.org

ISSN 2381-2400

Volume 7 (August 2020) *'Connections and Challenges'*



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The National Coalition of Independent Scholars is a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation (est. 1989) which supports independent scholars worldwide and provides them with a valuable scholarly community.

NCIS represents independent scholars from every continent and in many disciplines in STEM and the Humanities. Its members include unaffiliated scholars, adjunct and part-time faculty, emeritus professors, graduate students, researchers, artists and curators. The benefits of membership are many, but the great benefit of joining NCIS is affiliation with an internationally recognized intellectual society.

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TOGETHER AND APART: THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDEPENDENT SCHOLARS AND LEARNED SOCIETIES

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Date submitted: 12 May 2020
Accepted following revisions: 27 July 2020
First published online: 29 July 2020

Abstract

Since its founding in 1989, the National Coalition of Independent Scholars has made partnerships ranging from its current affiliation with the American Historical Association (AHA) to its discontinued one with the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), as well as its current partnership with the Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA). Throughout, NCIS leadership has had to address the question of “either-or” vs. “both/and” when it comes to priorities—whether NCIS funds should go to mounting an in-person conferences with all the challenges posed by this organizations’ unique interdisciplinary nature or sending its members to disciplinary conferences. In recent years, the answer has come down on the side of “both/and,” even as a variety of learned societies have adjusted in a variety of ways to get away from treating independent scholars as second-class members. Learned societies have had a long and mixed history in their relationship with scholars who practice outside the traditional academic structure, but in the long modern era have increasingly marginalized scholars who by choice or circumstance, practice outside of the tenure-stream, including those who work at the margins of the academies as contingent faculty, in ways that have ranged from the question of affiliation to eligibility for grants and awards. In recent years, though, as the modern university faculty has been increasingly eaten away at by adjunctification, learned societies large and small have been forced to confront the reality of growing number of non-tenure stream scholars among their ranks.

Making independent scholars welcome within disciplinary learned societies often comes down to affiliation or lack thereof, with the recognition that it is about much more than what to put on conference name tags. Rather, there is the paradoxical problem of treating non-affiliated post-graduate scholars as much as possible as equals, while recognizing them as a category of conferees who might require some assistance (primarily financial) to attend. And when it comes to issues similar to, but not always identical with contingent faculty, some of the major learned societies have moved beyond the familiar handwringing to include panels, workshops, and other programs related to IS issues. Finally, there is the parameters of meritocracy to be addressed, in making sure that well-published ISs get equal access to awards and prizes as well as opportunities to chair and comment on panels in their area of expertise. While much progress has been made in recent years, there is still more that can be done, that includes incorporating ISs into learned society leadership hierarchies and IS concerns into administrative committee structures, as well as joining NCIS in lobbying for more equitable access to outside fellowships and grants. This paper, based on NCIS archival material, and published primary and secondary sources about other organizations, will therefore take a look at the way a handful of learned societies in the humanities have responded to the growing presence of independent scholars, as well as what additional roles they can play, on their own and in partnership with NCIS, as “part of the solution.”

Keywords: *independent scholar, learned societies, contingent faculty*



INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of scholarly organizations, the learned society has gone from being an alternative space for scholarship that was a natural home for non-university affiliated scholars to what is in our own time a frequent excluder of said scholars. While the earliest Royal Societies that emerged from the post-Renaissance era were pointedly founded outside the universities of their era, most contemporary scholarly organizations have become largely structured around the needs of university-affiliated and tenure-stream faculty, who in turn dominate their leadership and set their agendas. Change has begun only in the last few decades and progress has frequently been slow. The first step has been the organizational acknowledgement of the existence of scholars working outside the university setting, the majority of whom have historically been female. It has been fitting therefore, that one of the earliest efforts to create change came through the Coordinating Council for Women in History, which will be described further on in this article.

But the most significant movement for parity within the scholarly organizations was launched by several regional independent scholarly societies that in 1986 coalesced into the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS). Some of the most noteworthy have included the Institute for Historical Research, one of the first organizations of this kind, founded in 1976; the Princeton Research Forum, one of the oldest continuously operating scholarly societies of its kind; and the Institute for Historical Study in San Francisco, which uniquely includes traditional academic as well as independent scholars. From there, there have been growing, though still uneven efforts among learned societies to respond to the needs of non-university affiliated scholars, and in some cases to partner with NCIS in response to the changing scholarly landscape that has been especially affected by the decline and adjunctification of the university; this is especially pertinent in creating a category of scholars who have university affiliations but function as independent scholars, and who have joined independent scholars who by choice or circumstance were never part of the university mode of scholarship. This paper will therefore begin by offering a short history of the learned society and its place vis-à-vis the university, especially the increasingly close connection between the learned society and the university. This history will be followed by an unscientific survey of the changing relationship between a handful of learned societies and their non- (or marginally) university-affiliated members, the role played by NCIS in creating change, and prospects for the future.

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LEARNED SOCIETY

The learned society as a forum for sharing and supporting research in the traditional intellectual (as opposed to professional) disciplines goes back to the Middle Ages, but really became a serious force for creating and spreading knowledge during the Scientific Revolution that began in the 1500s. The early Royal Societies and similar organizations established then became a formidable alternative space to the universities for scholarship, and notably offered a freer atmosphere than the universities. This was especially true in Catholic countries, where the Church enforced its limits on what knowledge could be pursued and publicized, something that became the source of Galileo's troubles. For example, the Royal Society of London, founded in 1660, initially created an alternative forum for the study of science and "natural philosophy" that is only beginning to be replicated in modern times with the Ronin Institute (Ronin Institute, n.d.; Jorgenson, 2017). Most of these societies also fostered the idea of the non-university affiliated gentleman or lady scholar, unusually making these scholarly forums open to women. Learned societies came to America with the founding of the American Philosophical Society by Benjamin Franklin, in 1743 (American Philosophical Society, n.d.).

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century, though, that the first learned societies that fit the modern definition of professional organizations as well as intellectual forums for a given discipline were founded, most famously the American Historical Association (AHA) whose first meeting took place in 1884, in conjunction with the American Social Science Association at Saratoga New York. The AHA was formally chartered in 1889, by an act of Congress, its stated purpose being "the promotion of historical studies, the collection and preservation of historical manuscripts and for kindred purposes in the interest of American history and of history in America"—deliberately more broad-based, at least on paper, than being intended simply for college and post-graduate level teachers of history. The original non-university nature of the AHA was made especially apparent in 1893, when the annual meeting was held in Chicago as part of the Columbian Exposition, and featured Frederick Jackson Turner's famous public address on the "Frontier Thesis" of American history (American Historical Association (n.d.), *Brief History*). The AHA would eventually set professional standards for the field that created assumptions that professional historians would, by and large, emerge from the academy, yet ironically its early leadership included noted independent historians such as George Bancroft. But this kind of organization that encouraged the prominence of at least white, male, well-connected independent



scholars was not to last. According to Marjorie Lightman (1981), the late-nineteenth-century modernization of the university towards a more corporate-like administrative structure had the side effect of eroding “an older, holistic relationship between the professor and the school, in favor of the specialized teacher/scholar who was categorized by discipline.” This change went hand in hand with the nineteenth-century secularization of American institutions of higher education, influenced by the German university model, so that the primary job of the professor was primarily conceived as “conducting research instead of monitoring student behavior” (Cooper, 2018, p. 253). In other words, the modernization of the university contributed to the creation of the ideal of the professional scholar whose work is supported by his (and eventually her) university affiliation, a model that has been reflected in the predominating assumption among the world of scholarly organizations long after it has ceased to be the reality for the majority of scholars, even within the university setting.

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY ORGANIZATIONS AND THE CHANGING DEFINITION OF PROFESSIONALISM

Early in its history, the first major challenge to the AHA’s focus on academic history and scholarship would arise from the public history community, which may have additionally provided a way in for many de facto independent scholars, given the assumed non-university focus of the practice of public history. In 1907, the Mississippi Valley History Association (later the Organization of American Historians) was founded originally to counter the elitism and Eastern focus of the AHA. The OAH also emphasized public history from its beginnings as the MVHA and thus may have been less academically dominated from the beginning: through its history, the OAH has been comparatively welcoming to the participation and perspectives of public historians and pre-college history teachers, paving the way for its current efforts to address the needs of independent scholars from a variety of backgrounds. But the early struggles within the OAH over the issue of the popularization of history, with all the implications about compromising scholarly rigor for the sake of reaching the non-academic public, further cemented the association of scholarly rigor with academic history that was not too dissimilar from that of the AHA. In fact, one thread running through a published history of the MVHA/OAH is the conflict between perceived professionalism in scholarship (generally identified as traditional academic scholarship), and the inclusion of a broad range of historical professionals besides university professors (though readers should not mistake this association with the assumption that learned societies like the OAH or AHA only welcomed academic historians to their ranks). But while this account did touch on early history job crises, and the possibilities for alternative employment for history PhDs, the association of traditional forms of scholarship with academic employment was left unaddressed, contributing to the current situation in which the structural barriers to scholars practicing scholarship outside the academy have only gradually been recognized, let alone dealt with in a meaningful way for scholars who had no academic affiliation, or the usually automatic associated access to university library resources (Kamen, 2011; Katz, 2011).

An ongoing issue with many of these societies became the issue of professionalism versus appeal to the public, a debate that affected questions of to the degree to which non-college teachers and nonacademic practitioners in the field would be included in terms of organizational concerns. The same issues came up for debate in the American Association of Geographers (AAG), founded in 1904, and which over the years adjusted its focus to a membership that included many who practiced geography in a variety of sectors and with accompanying differences in focuses. Today the AAG welcomes a membership that includes practicing geographers employed in a variety of sectors, as well as graduate students, retirees and others, showing the potential for a society to evolve towards a broad definition of a professional practitioner in its specific field. But for the major learned societies in history and other humanities and social sciences, professionalism became associated with tenure-stream academic affiliation, creating automatic assumptions about which scholars produce quality work in their field, and shaping organizational leadership, and other policy decisions accordingly (Cohen, 1988).

EARLY CAMPAIGNS FOR INCLUSION

Within the AHA itself, the first major challenges to its tenure-stream academic focus would arrive in the 1960s and 1970s, and then in way that brought out the gendered nature of this challenge. One of the first groups to make a major push for change was a group of radical historians who also wanted to politicize the AHA, in the service of opposition to the Vietnam War. The leaders of this effort included Arthur Waskow, who at the 1969 AHA meeting proposed no less than a major expansion of the council to include fifty members that would include in equal numbers, “students, elementary and secondary school teachers, non-professionals interested in history, and eminent scholars.” The group also called for funding for those who could not otherwise afford to attend AHA meetings, as well other changes intended to create more equal opportunity within the organization. According to Lightman, “the radical proposal for expanding the council offered legitimacy to members of the profession other than scholars in universities, and the proposal for funding for scholars who did not have the traditional sources



of travel subventions was intended “to alter the demography of the profession” and promote the participation of those “who traditionally had little or no voice” within it, namely those who were not tenure-stream academics. These transformative proposals were unfortunately sidetracked by the simultaneous effort to introduce a resolution for the AHA to take a stand against the Vietnam War. In this instance, this resolution was rejected on the grounds that taking a political stance was beyond the scope of the AHA’s purview. The effort of these activists to introduce contemporary politics into the AHA may therefore have undermined their more cogent effort to create real democratization of the organization. Ultimately, the effort to radically alter the AHA was abandoned, leading instead to the creation of the Radical History Caucus within the organization.

The next group to lobby for change was the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession – later the Coordinating Council for Women in History (CCWHP) – founded in 1969 to both bring women into the history itself, which created the early movement for women’s history, and to push for the greater inclusion of women in the history profession both within and beyond the academy. The CCWHP in some ways built on the momentum of previous agitation for change within the AHA created by the antiwar and radical caucuses within the AHA. The main difference was that, unlike these radical groups that focus on structural change within the organization, the CCWHP focused on the advancement of women in the profession (though the concern for nontraditionally affiliated scholars was never far from their consideration). These feminist activists also notably raised the question of gender and organizational structure, and how the greater inclusion and incorporation of women and scholars from “the independent sector” could create a more nurturing and supportive scholarly environment (Lightman, 1981). The CCWHP continues its work into the present, including offering grants and awards to women historians and scholars of women’s history, including the Catherine Prelinger Award, intended for a woman scholar “whose career has not followed a traditional path through secondary and higher education” (Coordinating Council for Women in History, n.d.); and the efforts of CCWH to create a more “level playing field” within the AHA for nontraditional scholars has in turn provided an important model for NCIS, albeit with a somewhat different set of challenges.

But even with these challenges, the general trend within learned societies during the second half of the twentieth century was towards a greater emphasis on professionalization, greater specialization by subject matter, and a tighter embrace of the university scholar model as the only (or at least principal) legitimate model of scholarly participation in a given field of intellectual inquiry. As Lightman put it, “the associations, which were traditionally open to all interested in the pursuit of specialized knowledge, gradually came to reflect the attitudes of those who were part of higher education,” namely that “academic” was essentially the same as “scholar.” The American Historical Association, along with the Modern Language Association, and the American Philological Association are all examples of traditional learned societies that in recent times have become academic-dominated, even when they have remained on paper open to all scholars practicing in their given fields. And these and other organizations are only slowly beginning to renegotiate the assumed relationship between scholarly legitimacy and university affiliation (Lightman, 1981).

THE CURRENT SITUATION: AN ANECDOTAL LOOK

What follows, therefore, is an unscientific look at the current state of independent scholars and scholarship within a handful of humanities-focused learned societies that host freestanding conferences at least biennially. I am purposely limiting them to those in the humanities and social sciences (including geography), as scholars in the STEM fields face additional challenges that are beyond the scope of this paper, though it is worth noting that many STEM learned/professional societies may be less academically focused than their humanities and social science counterparts, due to the significant presence of practitioners in industry, pre-college education, and government in most STEM fields (STEMERS College of Education, n.d.). And in the interest of full disclosure, I am focusing primarily on societies to which I have had ties, primarily, though not exclusively in history. So by looking at the current conditions as well as actions those societies have taken to address – or not – the situation of adjuncts, I hope I can paint a reasonably accurate picture of what has changed—or not—over the last couple of decades.

One of the most basic is the question of affiliation—or lack thereof—or more specifically, what to put on one’s badge in the absence of a traditional academic affiliation. This is something I personally had to deal with for the first time in 2009, upon losing what in retrospect, was the best job I ever had due to state cutbacks. Before, when working part-time, I had followed the advice of a graduate school mentor to maintain my part-time work in order to maintain a “fig leaf” affiliation, something that I have learned has become a fairly common practice among contingent faculty. After I was totally cut, however, I would for the first time, and reluctantly initially, put “independent scholar” as my affiliation. In subsequent years, how I have identified has depended a lot on my state of employment, and most recently, whether I have been representing NCIS. And as I noticed



the increased (and increasingly unashamed) designation of Independent Scholar over time, I have also taken note which societies seem, at least to varying degrees, to allow for the possibility of scholars working outside academia. These include (but may not be limited to) the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS), with its many rabbi-scholars among its ranks, and the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA), many of whose members have labor union rather than academic affiliations (and in general tends to make less of a deal of affiliations in the name of solidarity). But for too many societies, affiliation still matters in terms of being taken seriously, and even those faculty who enjoy a “fig leaf” affiliation with a prestigious university face the prospect of being “outed” as “only” adjuncts (Breitzer, n.d.). As adjuncts become the majority of university faculty, the stigma may have lessened somewhat, but it has not totally gone away. Beyond identification is the question of eligibility and advancement—book prizes in most cases are equal opportunity, but some grants may assume an academic affiliation, whether for the purpose of grant management or salary replacement for a faculty member who is expected to return to a tenure-stream academic job after a sabbatical.

Aside from the question of the status of contingent faculty, research support still fails to address the reality of scholars who work entirely outside of academia. For example, Tula Connell, a senior communications officer with a labor organization notes “I never intended to move into academia. But I do want to research and write.” Yet after completing her doctorate, she noted “I quickly found out that as an ‘independent scholar’ I have limited or no access to university libraries and online databases...no funding for conference or research travel; and little academic support network.” She also observes that “in general, tenured faculty have demonstrated striking resistance to the concerns of independent historians and contingent faculty, many of whom struggle with the same lack of resource access” (Keough, 2020).

Being advanced to the leadership ranks of a major learned society is something that to the best of my research, has not been achieved by an independent scholar (with the exception of Becky Nicolaides, Councilor of the AHA Research Division) as long as candidates are vetted by preselected nominating committees, making the noteworthy efforts of the 2019 NCIS conference keynote speaker, Emily Rose, to break the AHA Nominating Committee lock via petition, for better and worse Grossman and B. Nicolaides, 2020 ; H-Scholar, 2019). Notably, however the AHA Council passed a resolution the same year, declaring its commitment “to support, encourage, and engage the thousands of history scholars working off the higher education tenure track in a variety of setting.” The resolution included the assertion that “these historians should be welcomed into AHA leadership roles and considered in the selection of members of the prize and fellowship committees,” along with including non-tenure stream scholars in the editorial process of the AHA’s premiere publications, and working at “appropriate leverage points to facilitate and enhance access to scholarly resources,” most notably databases and online journals. The resolution also called for the AHA to increase “its own efforts to generate specialized training, funding opportunities geared towards their research goals, and promote collaborative research between scholars working inside and outside of higher education settings” American Historical Association, 2019). How this resolution will translate into action, of course, is only beginning to unfold.

The question is then how efforts like those of Rose to give contingent faculty (whose numbers continue to grow as the majority of those in academia) and non-academic scholars a greater voice in learned societies have changed things, or whether they have changed things at all. The answers have been as varied as the organizations, but for many simple changes, such as sliding-scale dues according to income level, with reduced dues for unemployed or underemployed members have become a reality, as have grants for conference attendance that acknowledge the reality that the need for “financial aid” to present may not necessarily end with graduate school. Indeed, a new issue that has been raised by some independent scholars and contingent faculty is whether they should be classed with and/or have to compete with graduate students (who are more likely to have support and resources) for the same designated grants. Indeed, it is a relatively new thing for some learned societies (including LAWCHA) to designate conference travel grants to independent/contingent faculty travel grants to enable them to present their research, while similar grants for graduate students are well established.

There are now, nonetheless, some learned societies that have grants specifically intended for independent scholars and/or contingent faculty, although the generosity of the grant may vary by organization and conference. For example, the American Jewish Historical Society has helped pay my way to more than one Biennial Scholars Conference with grants that made an appreciable difference when it came to airfare and other travel expenses.¹ Others may not necessarily be able to give more than a token amount, but the gesture of recognition is still worth something. The Association for Jewish Studies also offers,

¹ T. Brimkmann, personal communication, February 10, 2016.



among its travel grants, special grants to scholars who have little or no other sources of funding. However, most of these are not dedicated to independent scholars and/or contingent faculty, but are also offered to international scholars, and in the case of the Women's Caucus grant for scholars presenting about gender and Jewish studies, also includes graduate students (Association for Jewish Studies, n.d.).

Beyond the inclusion of independent scholars on the program, there is the question of how issues affecting independent scholars, including unfunded contingent faculty, are addressed as part of conference offerings. And when independent or adjunct-focused sessions do appear on the program, the next question is whether they are executed in ways that go beyond pitying and handwringing by the "haves" to allow the affected groups a voice, in panels and workshops specifically "by and for." Here I will begin to address the role played by NCIS in creating these changes. Besides being one of the many AHA-affiliated societies, NCIS's presence and visibility within the organization began with our efforts to literally get on the program, first with an affiliated society panel and then with a directly submitted panel, as well as expanding beyond the affiliated society tables to mount an occasional reception. Results have been mixed, but from previous AHA reports, it is fair to say that our efforts have succeeded in getting NCIS's name "out there" (NCIS, n.d. *Conference Travel Grant Winners Announced*; Breitzer, 2014b); this in turn means that while NCIS's status as a recognized learned society (and affiliation) may be a means to an end, it is not sufficient as an end in itself. The AHA has furthermore gone backwards in some ways by the decision of its then Executive Director, Arnita Jones, to change the Herbert Feis Award, created in 1984 for the best monograph by an independent scholar, to a public history prize in 2006 (American Historical Association, n.d. *Herbert Feis Award Recipients*).

Trends may be more hopeful in other organizations, most notably the Organization of American Historians (OAH) which specializes in American history, broadly defined. As a feature of its most recent annual meeting, the OAH sponsored a pre-conference, limited registration workshop designed to address the needs of independent scholars. Curiously, there was no mention of NCIS, though some NCIS members self-reported having attended. This experimental workshop included a "listening session" on how the OAH can better support independent scholars, as well as how to improve the workshop for the future. The OAH had then planned to include a repeat of this workshop at the 2020 annual meeting, but the recent outbreak of the Coronavirus resulted in the meeting being moved online, and the workshop appeared not to have been then held as part of virtual conference (Organization of American Historians, n.d., *Welcome to the OAH Virtual Conference on American History*). It is also noteworthy that the AHA is for the first time offering a travel grant, sponsored by the Mellon Foundation, specifically for independent scholars, as well as a separate one for Contingent/Non-Tenure Track faculty (Organization of American Historians, 2019; Organization of American Historians, n.d. *Independent Scholar Travel Grant*; Organization of American Historians, personal communication, March 13, 2020). These hopeful developments therefore raise the interesting question of how NCIS can work with societies that have begun to address the issues without NCIS—how does that shape any potential future partnership towards greater equity for independent scholars?

So far, the potential for active partnership between NCIS and other learned societies has appeared to be the most realizable with the small societies, viz. the growing working partnership between NCIS and the Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA). LAWCHA, in many ways is a natural partner for an organization like NCIS, given then number of scholar-activists among its ranks who are not necessarily tenured academics. In the process of forming a joint committee to address the needs of independent scholars (ISs) within the organization (modeled after an existing committee formed to help contingent faculty), there has been a growing awareness of the possibility to be both contingent and independent, given the marginal status of most adjuncts to their universities, but to function more as one or other, depending on circumstances. LAWCHA furthermore, has established models of provisions for contingent faculty that can be and, in some cases, have been adapted for Independent Scholars. Earlier this year, NCIS and LAWCHA formed a joint committee of members of both organizations (many of whom are active in both), which has come with a number of recommendations, including book reviewing opportunities and opportunities to have appropriate books by ISs reviewed in LAWCHA's journal, *Labor: Studies in the Working Class History of the Americas*. Furthermore, in the summer of 2019, the Contingent Faculty and Independent Scholar Committees convened a plenary session on contingent faculty and independent scholar issues for the organization's 2019 meeting. At this plenary session, reported as "well-attended and highly participatory," the presenters focused primarily on contingent faculty issues, but also acknowledge the continuity of contingent problems with those of independent scholars, from lack of access to libraries to lack of funding to attend conferences (Connell et al, 2019).



But as Connell has pointed out, not all progress has been forward. There is still the issue of graduate students, there has been the ongoing issue of lumping independent scholars and contingent faculty together with graduate students, which some in the first two categories see as demeaning, as well as failing to recognize the reality that while graduate student status is temporary, independent and or contingent status may not be. In addition, the goal of having dedicated LAWCHA Board seats for independent scholars and contingent faculty has yet to be realized. Overall, progress has been made, but there is still much to be done, including a need to generate awareness of the needs of independent scholars in an organization in which, as Connell describes, “even sympathetic labor scholars who are quick to support “gig” economy workers, fail to recognize the gig economy academics in their own ranks” (Connell, 2018).

Other efforts of note by other organizations include a book prize for independent scholars sponsored by the Modern Language Association, and a similar essay prize by the American Studies Association (American Studies Association, n.d. *Deadline Gloria E. Anzaldua Award*; Modern Language Association, n.d.). Interestingly, the ASA, which features specially organized caucuses around various issues and topics, does not appear to have one devoted to contingent faculty or independent scholarly issues. Its Digital Humanities Caucus, however, does advertise its inclusiveness, stating that “Our membership includes scholars from across a wide range of institutions and experiences, including university faculty and staff, K-12 educators, graduate students, independent scholars, and activists” American Studies Association, n.d. *Digital Humanities Caucus*). Similarly, and more directly, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) has founded an online Working Group on Non-Tenure Track Employment in Anthropology that mainly addresses contingent faculty issues but is open to all anthropologists practicing off the tenure track (including in the federal government, as my father did for many years). The announcement of this group includes the assurance that “representatives of AAA staff and leadership will be present, hoping to learn about issues you face and find ways to better support anthropologists in precarious employment situations” (American Anthropological Association, n.d. *Non-Tenure-Track Employment in Anthropology*). The AAA also provides a guide to resources and groups intended to support non-academic anthropologists, including NCIS (American Anthropological Association, n.d. *Career Resources*).

THE CONTINUED ROLE OF INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR ORGANIZATIONS

Given these hopeful trends, the flip side of the question is the continued place of NCIS, given its unique multidisciplinary nature, and its being defined with its (ever-changing) membership, rather than by any field or discipline (even if it is historian-heavy in membership). For most of NCIS’s members, it is increasingly not a case of either/or bit of both/and, even as beyond “fig leaf” affiliations, the adjunctification of the academy has created a distinct subset of ISs who are “in the university but not of it” and whose equal access to resources ranging from library access to conference travel funds may vary. In fact, conditions themselves vary widely, to the point that some full-time contingent faculty were treated, for all intents and purposes, like “real” faculty, something that remains almost unheard of with part-time faculty. By contrast, for non-university unaffiliated scholars, who work in a variety of settings, library resources, especially in the age of digitization, remains an ongoing challenge, makes the negotiation of an NCIS-rate JPass (for the Holy Grail of JSTOR) a singular achievement, one even more valuable than the letters of introduction to repositories also offered to NCIS members (National Coalition of Independent Scholars. n.d. *JPASS Benefit*). These days, most archives and manuscript repositories, at least those I have worked with, are not that excluding of ISs (essentially, if your project is pertinent to their collections, you are welcome and may even be eligible for travel grants to do research). I myself was able to travel to the Walter Reuther Archives as Wayne State University to do research with the aid of the Albert Shanker Travel Grant (Walter P. Reuther Library, n.d.). University research libraries, however, are another story – checkout limits may vary in generosity and eBooks can often only be viewed onsite with a guest card – and while some universities may offer more generous library privileges to their alumni, not all do.

Beyond matters material is the question of NCIS’s value as a scholarly community. For contingent members, it may be a wash, depending firstly on how adjuncts are treated within a given department, and secondly on how many adjuncts within a department have the interest in/wherewithal to do anything beyond teaching. But even for contingent faculty who function as ISs, a university may still be a more automatic place to find a scholarly community, something that may not be the case for ISs who have other forms of institutional employment, let alone those who lack any institutional affiliation. Even so, just as even tenure-stream family may gather their best colleagues from a chosen learned society rather than their department, many ISs continue to find mutual support within the independent scholar organizations. The question, though, is how much? This is especially pertinent in an age when digital communication and (ironically) greater acceptance of ISs within discipline-based learned societies have made NCIS and its regional affiliates to a degree superfluous, at least in terms of networking with



colleagues who have a common scholarly interest. This conundrum has had its effect on NCIS conferences, which from the founding conference in 1989 through 2008, were a biennial to annual occurrence, hosted in varying locations around the country, with varying themes. Then between 2008 and the belated 25th Anniversary conference in 2015, there was a significant hiatus, as NCIS underwent a period of transition. Even the acknowledged success of the 2015 conference, however, did not render future live conferences a given, in consideration of both the expense and significant volunteer labor involved in mounting them. Virtual conferences have been considered as an alternative (and may be considered again in light of the COVID-19 pandemic), but the success of the June 2019 meeting in Amherst, Massachusetts is evidence of the conclusion that there is no substitute for actually meeting in person people whom we are used to dealing with solely by email or Skype (Coons, 2019). In addition to physical meetings, NCIS has lately sponsored more informal, “meet-ups” in various cities in England and France, resulting in the establishment in 2020 of partner groups in those countries. Furthermore, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, NCIS conducted its first virtual international meetups via distance technology, which themselves have led to a series of hugely successful webinars.²

But the continuance of the NCIS conferences, as laudable a development as it has become, still does not address the question of the future of the older regional societies, most of which were founded in university communities as a source of mutual support for members who were predominantly women with advanced degrees married to university faculty, who saw themselves as more than stereotypical “faculty wives” but barred from more than secondary adjunct employment in their husbands’ workplaces in the bad old days of anti-nepotism policies.³ A number of these regional organizations have folded in recent years, as a result of ageing memberships and a changing IS population, as well as (again) other ways for independent scholars to connect and greater acceptance in discipline-specific organizations, as more and more scholars who identify as independent appear on conference programs. That said, at the most recent NCIS Conference in 2019 there was discussion of a possible revival of a Five-Colleges-area independent scholars’ group that evinced some interest among the local participating scholars at the conference. The partnership of NCIS with independent scholar organizations in the UK, France, and Australia as well as those in the USA also reflects the organization’s growing international reach. Even then, independent scholar organizations can lack the cachet of discipline-specific organizations. In recent years, the conferences and the metamorphosis of *The Independent Scholar* from a simple newsletter to an online open-access peer-reviewed journal has helped NCIS raise its profile and restyle itself, as a “real” learned society. In addition, as NCIS seeks to retain its credibility and professionalism, it has become necessary to maintain standards of membership that have, ironically, fallen by the wayside in many disciplinary organizations, for whom interest in the field may be enough, with publication standards for their journals (often published out of university presses) remaining rigorous and competitive (American Historical Association, n.d. *Affiliation with the American Historical Association*; Breitzer, 2018). Even so, more “open admission” to specialized organizations such as the AHA has not affected the essential academic domination of the organizations.

Although NCIS, in its bid to fill the breach for those who didn’t have access to regional IS organizations, was originally unable to provide said organizations’ intangible benefits, in recent years NCIS has moved on from a difficult period in its history, and has developed its own staying power, as membership continues to grow, and has evolved in response to changing membership demographics and needs. Its growing list of services, ranging from the JPass to letters of introduction to research repositories, and lately additional research support grants, have also reshaped NCIS towards being a full-fledged learned society. Even addressing the question of affiliation, for some members, it has become its own affiliation, and in some cases is required as at least co-affiliation in subsequent publications for conference travel grant awardees (National Coalition of Independent Scholars, n.d. *Membership Benefits*; National Coalition of Independent Scholars, n.d., *The NCIS Conference Support Grant*).

CONCLUSION: MORE TO BE DONE

So where do we go from here? It is clear enough that, especially as current trends continue towards the destruction of the university as we know it, it will be vitally important for learned societies, large and small, to incorporate both ISs into their leadership and IS concerns into their regular committee structure (along with contingent faculty and their concerns). And ISs are beginning to break into disciplinary learned society leadership, at least in terms of getting their names on the ballot, even

² E. Coons, personal communication, November 25, 2019; National Coalition of Independent Scholars, personal communication, April 15, 2020; and S. Breitzer, ‘Gender, Independent Scholarship, and the Origins of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars,’ 9.

³ This topic has been addressed at length in Susan Breitzer, ‘Gender, Independent Scholarship, and the Origins of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars,’ *The Independent Scholar* 4 (December 2018): 1-9.



if is still taking special petitions. For major organizations such as the American Historical Association, though, the best road to success may be via getting independents onto the nominating committees, whose purpose, at least officially with the AHA, has been to ensure that a greater diversity of scholars would be nominated for leadership positions (considering many factors, beyond field of scholarship) (American Historical Association, 2017) and it may still be more likely to happen within smaller, more specialized learned societies. But access to leadership is just the tip of the iceberg, when it comes to addressing the needs of independent scholars in substantive ways, including ensuring as much equal access as possible to society awards, as well as creating (and in the case of the AHA with restoring the Feis Award to its original purpose) prizes that are designated for independent scholars. While again, book and article awards generally do not discriminate, there is still the matter of getting information out; even more critical is equal access to first book subventions for those who are unlikely to get similarly publishing assistance from a university. And while many of the designated “early career” awards and mentoring may still be helpful for those who have graduated relatively recently and gravitated to “the independent track” early on, they may be more problematic for those who arrived there via more circuitous routes. And when it comes to larger grants, while NCIS can act as fiscal sponsor in lieu of a university (another of its services!), the assumption of semester sabbatical salary replacement remains harder to undo, thus barring many otherwise qualified scholars, depending on their employment or lack thereof. Clearly some problems will not be easily solved, and overall, there remains much to be done, but NCIS, both individually and in partnership with other learned societies maintains an important role in strengthening the place of ISs in the world of scholarship.

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