Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your inquiry about the seminar I am directing for the National Endowment for the Humanities entitled "The Thirteenth-Century 'Lives' of St Francis of Assisi." I hope that this letter will answer your questions about the seminar and help you to decide if you wish to complete an application for it. If there are still questions in your mind after reading this rather long letter, please contact me. The easiest way is by email (fransem@geneseo.edu), but you may prefer to telephone me at 585 703-COOK. I will be diligent in checking voice mail as the deadline approaches; but for normal inquiries, it is best to email me, for my able assistant Brad Franco will respond if the question is about logistics in Italy.

As you may know, I have had the privilege of directing seminars for teachers in Italy on this topic in 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1994, and 2001. I also directed summer seminars in Geneseo, NY in 1983, 1984, 1993, and 1996. In 2003, 2006, just this past summer, I directed NEH seminars for college teachers in Italy. These have all been wonderful intellectual and personal experiences for me. Altogether, I have worked with 195 teachers; many are now good friends. Everything that I have to say below and all that will transpire in Italy next summer are deeply rooted in my experiences in those thirteen seminars.

As the NEH literature indicates, my seminar will run for six weeks between June 22 and July 30. For the first three weeks, the seminar will meet in Siena; from there we will journey to Assisi for the second half of the seminar. I ask that seminar participants arrive in Siena no later than Saturday, June 20.

The Work of the Seminar:

The texts for this seminar are the most important primary sources for the life of St Francis of Assisi (ca.1182-1226). Three are biographies (actually it is best to call them 'lives' since they do not conform to modern purposes and methods of biographies)--two by Thomas of Celano and the Major Life (Legenda Maior, hereafter LM) by St Bonaventure. We will also study Francis' own writings and several collections of stories that are not 'official' materials concerning Francis. Furthermore, we shall consider in detail seven works of art containing stories from the life of Francis of Assisi. These include panel paintings in Pescia, Florence, Siena, Pistoia, and Orte plus two fresco cycles in the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi.
We will approach these works with several questions in mind. It will not be the major concern of the seminar to search for exactly what Francis did or said or what he looked like, although it would not be prudent to ignore those issues totally. We shall primarily consider the various interpretations of Francis' life that these verbal and visual texts give us and try to understand why the writers and artists, who essentially had the same collections of stories and witnesses to use as sources, created such different versions of the life of the saint of Assisi. We will consider the intended audiences for these works and try to reconstruct the points of view of their creators. How did the past (what Francis did and said) interact with the present (the status of the Order in the Church, changes that had taken place since Francis' time, personal views of the authors) to create a series of interpretations based on historical fact but continually made relevant to a rapidly changing world and Order? I am also interested, in part by using the art all around us, to discuss shifting ideas of sanctity during and after the time of St Francis. We will also consider the relationship of verbal and visual images of the saint and how artists "translated" written accounts into visual images.

The seminar will typically meet four times per week for about three hours per session. The default pattern will be seminar meetings on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Because of our location in Italy and the fact that we have to travel to visit some of our "texts," our schedule will probably be at least a bit different each week. In Week I, we will meet four times in Siena. During those sessions, we will lay out the framework of the seminar and begin our discussion of Francis' writings and Thomas of Celano's first life of St Francis (I Cel), commissioned in 1228, two years after the saint's death. In Week II, we will continue our discussion of I Cel. However, on Tuesday we will travel to Pescia and Pistoia to see two of the earliest narrative paintings of Francis' life. In Week III, we will begin to examine works such as the Anonymous of Perugia, the Legend of the Three Companions, and the Assisi Compilation, collections of stories made in large part as preparation for Thomas of Celano to write a new 'life' of Francis. On Tuesday of that week, we will journey to Florence to see several Franciscan works of art, especially a panel painting with twenty stories from Francis' life in the splendid church of Santa Croce, plus somewhat later versions by Giotto and Ghirlandaio, Michelangelo's teacher.

On Friday of Week III, we will take a voluntary but important trip to Rome, spending a day experiencing Franciscan Rome rather than the usual visits which stress Imperial and Baroque Rome. Participants may choose to return to Siena that evening or may wish to stay in Rome or travel elsewhere from there.

On Monday of the fourth week, we will reconvene in Assisi. For the first week, we will discuss Thomas of Celano's second life of Francis written ca.1247 and, of course, the art that surrounds us. Our discussions in Weeks V and VI will focus on Bonaventure's LM plus the continuation of our discussion of the fresco cycles in the Basilica where the saint is buried. Since our seminar room will be in the friary, the Sacro Convento, attached to the Basilica, we will probably spend bits of several days looking at the frescoes.

Of course, there are many images of Francis in addition to those we will study in detail, and we will not ignore them. There are several important early Franciscan works in the Pinacoteca (art museum) of Siena. There are almost 100 images of Francis in the Basilica in Assisi. Furthermore, we will spend the entire six weeks in cities and countryside that Francis knew well and loved dearly. We shall draw upon the entire range of resources available to us to make the seminar as rich and intensive as possible. In addition to the trips
mentioned above, we will spend three days traveling out of Assisi to visit the most important places in Francis' life as well as some of the most significant artistic monuments associated with him. We will travel to Perugia, Greccio, Spoleto, Montefalco, Orte, Orvieto, Todi, Nocera Umbra, Gubbio, and La Verna.

Each participant will be asked some time in April to choose a modern biography of Francis from a list I will send out and to have it read by the beginning of the seminar. I have found that everyone around the table having a perspective on Francis from one of his biographers is a good way to begin our conversation.

Each seminar participant will be asked to do a significant amount of writing. One part of the writing will be the keeping of a journal focused on works of art that we study and their relationship to the written texts that we will be discussing around the seminar table. I will also pair up participants who will write for one another. Since my administrative assistant will be participating in our activities, he will give us an even number. Each participant will also be asked to complete a piece of written work about Francis of his/her choosing.

The written texts are available in two large paperback volumes newly edited and translated. You can examine these two volumes by going to www.newcitypress.com and clicking on Francis and Clare of Assisi—Early Documents. Our readings are from the first two volumes: The Saint and The Founder. However, I will encourage participants to purchase and bring with them both the third volume and the index volume. I suggest that participants purchase the volume containing Clare’s writings and early works about her since we will have to get to know Clare if we are to understand Francis fully. I will also urge participants to buy or borrow from a library the catalogue of early paintings of Francis that I published in 1999. To look at it, go to www.olschki.it. Click on catalogue and type in ‘William Cook.’ The price is high, although 47 euros is actually rather inexpensive for a book published in Italy with lots of photographs. There are also used copies to be found at websites like www.abebooks.com, and lots of libraries have copies that can be borrowed.

This volume will help participants to contextualize what we see, to learn about works now quite scattered, and even perhaps to find images to pursue on private trips on weekends. Participants will have access to libraries in Siena (fair collections in English), and I have copies of several particularly important books for participants to use. Those who want to do scholarly work will have access to libraries in Florence, seventy-five minutes from Siena by bus, and to the library in the Sacro Convento in Assisi. Churches where important paintings are located are usually open from 7:00 till noon and from 3:00 to 7:00. The Basilica in Assisi is open all day. Most museums in Siena are open seven days a week. Normally, the seminar will meet from 9:00 till noon, so everyone will have ample time to re-visit important sites.

I expect to spend a good deal of time with participants outside the seminar meetings. During the first week, I plan to meet with each participant individually to discuss his/her interests and seminar projects. There will be many informal conversations occasioned by visits to museums and churches as well as by the sharing of meals. We will have lots of bus rides together too.

Arrangements in Siena and Assisi:
Participants will receive stipends of $4400. All seminar-related expenses such as travel, food, lodging, and admissions to museums will come out of that stipend. Some of our ground transportation is paid for by the NEH, but not all. I expect that flights from the eastern USA to Rome or Milan will be at least
$1500 next summer. By the time participants are selected, my administrative assistant and I will have basic flight information, and of course you can and should monitor prices on one of the travel websites. Getting to Siena from one of Italy's international airports is not easy, but Rome (FCO) is easier than Milan (MXP). I suggest that you look at the possibility of flying into either Pisa (PSA) or Florence (FLR). If you are returning to the States immediately after the seminar, I suggest flying into Florence or Pisa and out of Rome.

We will be using chartered buses to travel, except for the visits to Florence and Rome from Siena and to Perugia from Assisi. Such transportation is expensive, but the NEH is paying for private coaches. I will collect from each participant at the beginning of the seminar the equivalent of about $200. This money will be used by my administrative assistant to buy tickets for public buses, museum admissions, et al. If family members accompany participants on these trips, they will be asked to pay for all of their transportation costs and of course pay for admissions.

Good, inexpensive housing in Siena is quite difficult to find, especially since we will be there during the Palio, Siena's world-famous festival (see below). Furthermore, there is another NEH seminar meeting there (Dante with Ronald Herzman and William Stephany). We will book some apartments inside the city as well as rooms, both singles and doubles, in a small hotel. These will not be cheap, but we have in the past negotiated a good price with management.

For the Assisi segment of the seminar, participants will be housed in small hotels near the city's main square. Singles will, at current exchange rates, cost about $60 per night; obviously those willing to share a room will pay less.

With regard to housing, successful applicants will be asked to make a commitment to the housing they prefer within a few days of notification in late March. I cannot be responsible for your housing if you fail to make a commitment right away or later decide that you want some other form of accommodation. Consequently, you should think seriously as you apply about the kind of accommodations you require as well as about family members and friends who may accompany you to Italy during all or part of the seminar. Of course, my assistant and I will have much more specific information for participants at the time of notification. If friends or relatives are coming to visit you for a part of our time in a city, you will have to make housing arrangements for them, although we will put you in touch with hotels that are reasonably priced. People who visit you cannot “crash” in your room by sleeping on the floor or re-arranging the furniture! Some participants have elected to find their own housing. However, it is vital that it be in the city and not a serious commute away.

In general, the housing I am describing is in family-run hotels. Some of the conveniences we associate with hotels are often not available. Most have no lobbies or restaurants. Do not expect air conditioning, or even soap and shampoo in your room. Rooms tend to be rather simple and quite small, and occasionally services are slowed down by an illness in the family or a maid who fails to show up. Two pre-conditions for surviving and enjoying accommodations in Italy are flexibility and good humor.

Although Assisi is generally a quiet place, at least at night, this is not the case with Siena. Sienese stroll through the streets talking and singing all night long, and the street cleaners are out very early. During the days of the Palio, the streets will be filled with noisy people all night long. This is part of the life of
Siena, but it is not conducive to meditation or cloistered study. Keep this in mind when you are deciding whether to apply for this seminar.

Italian cities have Internet shops. For a rather small amount of money, anyone can purchase time on the Internet, including of course the checking and sending of email messages. I urge everyone to bring a laptop. The hotels in Assisi have wireless Internet access.

There are quite a few inexpensive restaurants in Siena and Assisi. A simple 3-course meal (pasta, main dish with potato or vegetable or salad, simple dessert) will typically cost $25-30. There is an increasing number of inexpensive “fast food” restaurants (take out pasta, a slice of pizza, even a McDonalds in Siena). I suspect that most participants will sometimes buy salami, prosciutto, cheese, bread, fruit, and wine in stores and eat in their rooms or outdoors. There are several good and accessible markets near our housing. Especially in Siena, there are several restaurants worth a splurge. In Assisi, the restaurant attached to one of our small hotels is the city’s best and was written up a few years ago in the New York Times. A full meal there will cost $45+.

If you add up all of the costs--air fare, housing, food, transportation in Italy, museum admissions, et al., you will quickly discover that the NEH stipend will not cover all of your expenses, let alone those of family members. I do not say this to discourage anyone from applying. However, it is vital that you know the financial realities before you decide to apply. Of course, no one knows the exchange rate between the dollar and the euro. Last summer it was as high as $1.60 for a euro and as low as $1.46. The estimates I have made in the previous paragraphs assume a euro worth about $1.50. On the day I write this letter, the euro equals $1.36.

One of the joys of my previous seminars in Italy has been the large number of spouses, children, and friends of participants who were with the group at least part of the time. Families are welcome to participate in all the activities of the seminar, including all visits to churches and museums. However, they will not be allowed to attend formal seminar meetings; this is an NEH policy, and no exceptions are allowed.

Because of special logistics involved in an overseas seminar, participants will receive their entire stipends before their departures to Italy so that they will be able to pay for their flights and deposit money in their bank accounts to be accessed in Italy by an ATM.

Siena and Assisi:

Siena is a city of about 60,000. It is the best preserved medieval city in Italy. Traffic has been removed from the city's center, making it a truly delightful place to stroll and shop. There are about a dozen buses each day to and from Florence, and the cost is about $20 round trip. There are buses and trains to many nearby towns such as San Gimignano.

Siena is famous for its art but also for the Palio, a festival which culminates with a horse race in the central piazza of the city (the Piazza del Campo). The Palio takes place on July 2, the Thursday of the second week of the seminar. The race involves spirited competition between the districts (contrade) of the city. Since I am a member of one of these contrade, Onda (the Wave), I hope to "initiate" participants into the wonders and intricacies of the Palio of Siena. I also hope that everyone will attend my contrada's street dinner the night before the Palio (about $60 per person).
One of the many joys of Siena for the seminar will be the presence of the Herzman-Stephany Dante seminar. The two groups will do things together, and we will take advantage of the knowledge that Ron and Bill have of Dante; Bill Stephany’s wife, Christie Fengler, is a medieval art historian who will also be available to seminar participants. There are quite a few people that Ron, Bill, and I know who will be dropping by during the time we are in Siena, and we will certainly “exploit” them as well. When we are in Assisi, our seminar will probably host the Dante seminar for a day and show them around St Francis’ home town.

Assisi has about 10,000 inhabitants. It too is a beautiful town with an astounding number of monuments and shops. There is frequent bus service to Perugia, the chief city of the region. However, Assisi is not on a main train line or highway, and thus opportunities to travel by public transportation from Assisi are limited.

Both Siena and Assisi have a variety of cultural events and recreational facilities in the summer months. There will be a significant number of concerts. Both cities have municipal swimming pools. If participants need child care, we can try to arrange for it in advance if we receive the request at the time the participants are chosen. I once had a participant request child care at the time of arrival, and it caused problems and tensions for everyone. Child care is expensive in Italy, perhaps as much as $15 per hour. It is possible that some participants will come with children or spouses who can provide child care, but that is not a sure thing. Neither Assisi nor Siena is near the sea, although there are occasional buses that connect Siena with the west coast.

My seminar not only involves reading and discussing books but also seeing paintings, many of which are scattered in small museums and churches. Thus, participation involves serious walking in towns with lots of hills. Both Siena and Assisi are hill towns paved in cobblestones. In the latter, the housing is a hearty and hilly 15-minute walk from our seminar room. In Siena, we will be negotiating hills and cobblestones and lots of stairs several times each day. In Rome and Florence, we will walk long distances on crowded streets between sites. Unfortunately, access for the handicapped is often severely limited. Participants need to be able to walk a lot and climb a lot of steps at a time. I do not want to exclude anyone from applying because of a disability; if you think there might be a problem with regard to your participation, please contact me before you apply.

A Little about Me and My Assistant:

Let me tell you a little about myself. As I mentioned earlier, this will be my fourteenth NEH seminar for school teachers. I am a medieval church historian. I have published a book about St Francis: Francis of Assisi: The Way of Poverty and Humility in a series, The Way of the Christian Mystics, published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN and recently reprinted by Wipf & Stock. I have written two books about the early images of St Francis in Italian painting. One is an examination of early Italian images that are currently in the USA: St Francis in America Franciscan Press, Quincy, IL, 1998. The second, published in Florence in 1999 (see above), is an attempt to catalogue all of the early Italian paintings of Francis. I also recently edited a collection of studies of Franciscan art published by Brill. With my colleague and Dante seminar co-director Ron Herzman, I have written The Medieval World View: An Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2nd edition 2005). Ron and I have made a 12-tape (video or audio) course for The Teaching Company on St Francis that is
available from The Teaching Company: www.teach12.com ). Ron and I also recently published an article about what Dante learned from St Francis and another about Dante’s view of Siena in the Commedia.

Incidentally, Ron and I have also made video/audio courses on Dante and Augustine. I have courses out on Machiavelli, Tocqueville, and the lives of great Christians and will soon release a course about the history of the Catholic Church.

I have taught at SUNY Geneseo for 38 years. In addition to my medieval courses, I have offered courses on the Bible and the History of Christian Thought. I also regularly offer courses on the Italian Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. My “odd” course is an examination of Democracy in America by Alexis de Tocqueville. I have always been interested in democracy, but this interest came front and center 10 years ago when I was a candidate for the US Congress and came pretty close to winning! Last spring, I gave a lecture on democracy to an international youth conference in Slovakia.

For the 2008-09 academic year, I am teaching in the Religion Department at my alma mater, Wabash College in Indiana. One of the joys of this experience is the opportunity to develop a new course entitled World Christianity. It will examine forms of Christianity other than Catholic and Protestant and also look at Christianity in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. This in part came out of an invitation last year to deliver some lectures about Christianity in Asia at a conference in Kyoto, Japan, in part from an opportunity to meet the Patriarch of Constantinople in 2007, and in part from recent travels to ancient monasteries in Ethiopia.

I have been in Italy for at least a small part of each of the last 30 years, most recently last summer directing a seminar for college teachers. Between the time I write this letter and my 2009 seminar, I will be in Italy four times—in February to do a program for the Friends of Florence, in March with Wabash students, in April to give some lectures at the Vatican, and in May with Geneseo students.

Twenty-one years ago, I bought an apartment in Siena, located literally a stone’s throw from the Piazza del Campo. I have spent a lot of time in both Siena and Assisi and just about all the towns and villages of Tuscany and Umbria. I can provide a lot of suggestions about travel, shopping, and eating. I speak Italian well enough that we will not encounter any problems that we can’t deal with.

Let me introduce you to my family. My oldest, Paul, now 43, lives in Macon, GA. My middle son, Gualberto, is 41 and lives and works in Rochester; he has a 1-year-old daughter named Francesca. Angel is 36 and a graduate of SUNY Geneseo. He is a New York State Trroper. His wife is a high school English teacher, and they have three children. Each of my sons has been to Italy at least twice. Angel "endured" three of my seminars there while he was in high school. I have also raised eight other boys, the youngest of whom, Jimmy, is a freshman at St Bonaventure University. I am hoping that he will come for a part of the seminar, and will not be surprised if one or two of the others decides to be in Siena for the Palio.

I am pleased that my administrative assistant this summer will be Brad Franco. He is a SUNY Geneseo graduate of 2002 and is currently finishing his Ph.D. in medieval history at Syracuse University. Brad’s research concerns the bishops of Siena in the 14th century, so he know a lot about all sorts of things relevant to this seminar. Brad has been my assistant both for my most recent
NEH seminar and also for the course which I teach in Siena for SUNY Geneseo undergraduates. I hope that Brad will be joined by his wife Meg.

Applying for the Seminar:
As you think about applying for this seminar, you may be motivated in part by the opportunity to travel in Italy and perhaps even to return to the ancestral village. Although these are good things to do, they must be done in addition to all the commitments required for the seminar. Participants are expected to attend all seminar meetings and field trips, and it really is not possible to miss a seminar activity in order to spend a few days with the relatives or visit a place you have always wanted to see which happens to be hundreds of miles from Siena or Assisi. If you have these sorts of things in mind, you should think about doing them before June 20 or after the seminar ends on July 30.

I hope that teachers from a variety of academic disciplines will apply for the seminar. I am interested in having social studies teachers apply to the seminar for several reasons. First, Francis of Assisi is a major figure in the Western tradition; and the sources for his life are thus of great importance to an understanding of that tradition. Furthermore, the seminar will in part focus on the relationship between verbal and non-verbal texts. Obviously, photographs in books, films, and dvds are a part of every history course in secondary schools, but often as decoration or even diversion from the central focus of the course. I hope that social studies teachers in my seminar will take away a heightened awareness of how works of art are important texts in their own right, both reflecting and shaping perceptions and values. I also hope that there will be art teachers in the seminar. This is not only because of the importance of their input but also because I hope that they will become more aware of how certain works of art are related to the broader intellectual tradition in the West. I think that English teachers will profit from our close examination of texts that are of great literary merit as well as historical importance. Obviously, the seminar will be valuable for teachers of religion. I hope that there will be applicants from other disciplines as well—e.g. foreign languages, science, and mathematics. Other school personnel such as principals, counselors, and librarians are also eligible to apply. Teachers in elementary and middle schools are invited to apply too. It is not important for applicants to demonstrate that they will specifically deal with the subject matter of the seminar in their courses. I do not expect applicants to be familiar with the texts at the time they apply. There is also no language requirement. The seminar will be conducted in English, using English translations of all texts. Obviously, a knowledge of Italian is beneficial in activities outside the seminar, but those who know no Italian should have no fear about applying.

The application may be downloaded from the website www.neh.gov. However, applications must be submitted in hard copy. Please follow the instructions carefully. Applications must be postmarked by March 2 and sent to the following address:

Dr. William R. Cook  
Department of History  
SUNY Geneseo  
1 College Circle  
Geneseo, NY 14454-1401
The most important part of the application is the required essay. It should include relevant academic and personal information and your qualifications to do the work of the seminar and contribute to discussions. I would like you particularly to discuss why you are interested in this seminar and its texts. In other words, I want you to address not so much why you think that you would benefit from participation in a Summer Seminar for School Teachers, but rather why you would benefit from six weeks of study of the early "lives" of St Francis of Assisi. Furthermore, I would like you to comment on the particular value for you of studying for six weeks in Italy. Let me make clear that I am looking primarily for people interested in Francis rather than generic Italophiles. Ideally, I would like to have people who would apply for the seminar if it were being held in Crawfordsville, Indiana or Geneseo, NY. Although for many of you there may be some direct application to your classes when you return from Italy, that is not required. However, you should explain as fully as possible how the work of this seminar will fit into your general intellectual and professional development.

Letters of recommendation should come from people who know you and your professional achievements and concerns well. Often, a principal or superintendent is not that person. Letters from colleagues, former students, former NEH seminar participants, and directors of institutes and seminars that you have been a part of are of great value to me and the selection committee. Letters must submitted in hard copy. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that the recommendations have arrived in Geneseo before the selection committee members begin their review of applications beginning about March 5.

I apologize for such a lengthy letter. However, because the texts to be studied may be less familiar to you than those of Shakespeare or Plato and because of the seminar's location, I though it advisable to bombard you with a lot of information. Since you have struggled through this letter, you are well on your way to applying! I look forward to receiving an application from you. For those who choose not to apply for my seminar, I hope that you will contact other directors and find a seminar or institute that better addresses your aspirations and interests. And if you know fellow teachers who would profit from my seminar, please pass on information about it to them.

Peace and Good Things,
[Pace e bene, as Francis would say],

William R. Cook
Distinguished Teaching Professor of History, SUNY Geneseo
Visiting Professor of Religion and History, Wabash College