Five University of Illinois scholars have received National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowships for 2015. The U. of I. is the only institution to be awarded more than three of the fellowships for the coming year.

The grant recipients from the U. of I. are Antoinette Burton, a professor of history, Bastian Professor of Global and Transnational Studies, a professor of gender and women’s studies and interim head of the department of sociology; Robert Morrissey, a professor of history; Timothy Pauketat, a professor of anthropology and of medieval studies; François Proulx, a professor of French; and Valeria Sobol, a professor of Slavic languages and literatures.

“Congratulations to all five of our NEH award recipients,” Chancellor Phyllis M. Wise said. “These grants are among the most prestigious and competitive scholarly funding opportunities in the nation – in any discipline or field. These scholars stand out both on our campus and across the country for their academic achievements, and it is gratifying to see them recognized for their excellence.”

The U. of I. fellowships were among 233 humanities grants, totaling $17.9 million, announced Monday (Dec. 8) by the NEH. The fellowships, one category of NEH grants, are awarded to university and college faculty and independent scholars for advanced research.

In the past five years, according to the NEH website, the fellowships program has received an average of 88 awards – a 7 percent funding ratio, making it one of the most competitive humanities awards in the country.

“To have one faculty member receive one of these awards in a year is a high point for any university in the country,” Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Ilesanmi Adesida said. “To be home to five such outstanding scholars in a single year is a mark of the highest distinction and a clear message that Illinois truly is a comprehensive public research university. All five of these distinguished scholars deserve the congratulations of the entire campus community.”

The faculty members and their projects:

Burton: “Wars Against Nature? Environmental Fictions of the First Anglo-Afghan Wars.” Burton’s history is the first to argue that representations of Afghanistan’s difficult terrain served as a strategic fiction that allowed the British to blame their limited success in subduing the region in the 19th century on its hostile environment, rather than on Afghan fighters – making it the “graveyard of empires” in the Victorian imagination.

Morrissey: “The Illinois and the Edge Effect: Bison Algonquians in the Colonial Mississippi Valley.” Morrissey’s project is the first ethnohistory and environmental history of the Illinois Indians and their neighbors from 1200 to 1850. He tells the story of the rise and decline of the Illinois as “bison Algonquians” who mastered this important and contested region at the center of the continent.

Pauketat: “Spirits, Birds, and Luminous Beings: Reconceptualizing Ancient Urbanism.” Pauketat reimagines the future of urbanism by looking back
at some of the world's most ancient cities, using new theories and even newer archaeological evidence from the ruins of cities and citylike places in Neolithic China, Africa, and the Americas before 1492.

Proulx: “Reading and French Masculinity at the Fin de Siècle.” Proulx investigates young men’s reading habits as a subject of grave social concern in fin-de-siècle France. He considers how excessive reading was blamed for the declining virility of French youth in the late 19th century, and details what was at stake in representations of the young male reader by novelists of the era from Jules Vallès to Marcel Proust.

Sobol: “Visions of Empire in Russian Gothic Literature, 1790-1850.” Sobol investigates the connection between the Gothic elements of many Russian literary works and their imperial context. She argues that the persistent presence of Gothic tropes is not just a tribute to a fashionable Western literary trend, but exposes the Russian empire's anxieties about its borders, identity and colonial power.

The National Endowment for the Humanities is an independent federal agency, and one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the United States.