This is our new strategic plan.

Our plan outlines what we are going to do and why. Over the next five years we will work to make the public humanities central to a just, creative, and connected Illinois.

How will we do it? By building on the fundamental work already underway. We’ll continue to use a partner-centered, data-informed, values-aligned approach to delivering on our mission. We’ll work towards our vision by creating programs to address timely issues, by amplifying humanities organizations and programs around the state with funding and visibility, by connecting practitioners with one another and across sectors, and, most of all, by promoting and strengthening the statewide cultural community of which we are part.

Our plan is an expression of our values. Throughout this planning process, we returned again and again to the values that guide our priorities and our approach. We are committed to being partner-centered, to honoring our complex histories and cultures, to making space for difficult (and crucial) conversations, and to actively promoting equity.

Our plan is an invitation. As you explore this plan, we hope you feel as energized and inspired as we are by the vision we are working towards — and the journey we are embarking upon. We cannot do it without you — the people who make the humanities happen every day in every corner of our state.

Thank you for your partnership. Thank you for sharing this vision.

Jai L. Winston, Board Chair
Program Director, St. Paul John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Gabrielle Lyon
Executive Director

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Illinois Humanities is a statewide nonprofit organization that activates the humanities through free public programs, grants, and educational opportunities to spark conversation, foster reflection, build community, and strengthen civic engagement. Founded in 1974, we are the state partner for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Our mandate is rooted in a national commitment to ensuring people have access to the humanities to develop “the wisdom and vision” needed for our thriving democracy.1 We provide free, high-quality humanities programming in communities across the state with a particular focus on serving communities of color, individuals living on low incomes, counties and towns in rural areas, small arts and cultural organizations, and communities highly impacted by mass incarceration.

Illinois Humanities is the state’s champion for the humanities. We are the only statewide organization focused on ensuring equitable access to the humanities, and we are building a singular network of diverse partners and perspectives on issues that matter to Illinoisans. Through our community-centered approach, we work to support a thriving cultural ecosystem that leverages the humanities to make residents’ lives better, their communities stronger, and Illinoisans more connected.

We serve Illinoisans in unique and impactful ways. Our grantmaking targets community-based culture, history, arts, and heritage organizations that lack access to philanthropic funding due to their size or location. We build community and capacity by providing one-on-one support to applicants and supporting grantees with community- and skill-building opportunities to strengthen the field. In our educational programming, we prioritize access through programs like the Odyssey Project/Proyecto Odisea, which offers free courses for college credit in the humanities to income-eligible adults who have had limited access to higher education. In our public programs, we center community-driven humanities and people’s lived experiences.

Especially in times of increased political division, the humanities are necessary for democracy and for enabling us to imagine the kind of society we want and need — equitable, livable, and civically engaged.
Organization Overview

As of fiscal year 2023, Illinois Humanities has an organizational budget of $4.7M, a staff of 20 primarily located in our Chicago-based office, and an 18-member board of directors.

In 2022 (our last completed fiscal year), Illinois Humanities organized 260 free programs that reached more than 16,000 people across the state. We awarded 183 grants totaling over $880,000, provided free college courses in the humanities to 47 income-eligible adults, and college-level mini-courses and reading groups to more than 50 students. We were active in 76 of Illinois’ 102 counties and all 17 congressional districts. Revenue streams were comprised of, roughly, government funding (57%), private foundation and corporate funding (37%), and individuals (7%).

Context for Our Work

The humanities are critical for enriching people’s quality of life, strengthening social cohesion, and fostering imagination.

Most Americans think that arts and culture organizations can and should play a critical role in helping their communities by providing opportunities to learn and to connect, serving as an emotional outlet, and giving practical help.

Irrespective of race, ethnicity, or economic status, people want hometown cultural institutions to: 1) increase accessibility and new works; 2) embrace equity and inclusion; 3) become places of belonging and welcome; and 4) deepen community rootedness.

People with access to cultural amenities are demonstrably more deeply attached to their communities and benefit significantly in terms of personal and community well-being and resilience. Engaging with any form of arts and cultural activities contributes to the promotion of health and well-being, prevention of mental and physical illness, and management of existing health conditions. In addition to these social goods, humanities organizations generate revenue and help fuel our economy. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that the arts and cultural production sector contributed $31.1 billion to Illinois’ economy in 2021, representing 3.3% of Illinois’ gross state product and 196,769 jobs.

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY “HUMANITIES?”

Broadly, the humanities help us understand and interpret what it means to be human; participating in the humanities equips us to form a diverse society. In academic settings, the humanities encompass studies of art, art history, communications, culture, ethnic and gender studies, ethics, folklore and folk culture, literature, languages, music, dance, theatre, history, and philosophy.

At Illinois Humanities, our focus is the public humanities that happen (most often) outside of academic institutions. We create — and support — programs and modes of engagement that emphasize curiosity, questioning, and dialogue. Public humanities programs feature the following practices:

- The public humanities create a public. Gathering is designed with intentionality; and the people who gather may not already know each other.
- People are talked with, not talked at. People are learning “with,” not just learning “from.”
- People are encouraged to ask questions to better understand their own — as well as others’ — experiences and points of view.
- Regardless of the mode of practice, public humanities support people to employ capacities we inherently hold as humans — being curious, listening closely, changing our minds, and embracing complexity and nuance. The public humanities call upon us to use, practice, and develop ways of engaging with one another that help us discern our own beliefs, expand our understanding of what is possible, and appreciate that differences make us stronger. These particularly human abilities are like any other skill: they get better with practice and, when underdeveloped or underattended, they atrophy.
However,

• Equitable access to cultural amenities is significantly challenging for communities of color and adults living on low incomes.\(^5\)
• Rural and small-town arts and culture organizations are least likely to receive funding from traditional sources due to their size, capacity, or geographic location.\(^6\)

Illinois Humanities’ approach to fulfilling our mission is deeply informed by these inter-related factors.

In 2022 and 2023, Illinois Humanities undertook its own research into the cultural ecosystem of the state by examining 359 grantee partners that received funding during our COVID-19 relief and recovery efforts. While not a comprehensive picture of all public humanities organizations or programs in Illinois, access to this swath of grantee partner data and experience gave us a unique opportunity to illuminate the state’s cultural landscape:

Grantee partners serve significant numbers of low-income residents, communities of color, and rural and small towns.

Nearly half of grantee partners operate with annual budgets of less than $100,000, many of them without paid staff.

Two out of every three grantee partners operate in an area without sufficient access to broadband.\(^7\)

Nearly a quarter of grantee partners provide programming in a zip code with more COVID cases than the statewide average.

60% of grantee partners serve communities that were under health and economic duress before the pandemic.

Though more than 40% of grantee partners were founded in the past two decades, some have been operating for more than 100 years.

We have emerged from the pandemic with a clearer understanding of the statewide public humanities ecosystem and the role Illinois Humanities is playing, and should play, in securing equitable access to, and participation in, the humanities.

Simultaneously, demand for Illinois Humanities’ programs continues to increase, particularly as an equity-driven funder, creative partner, and convener. All these things are unfolding against a backdrop of increasing anxiety about social and political polarization.

Illinois Humanities has not had a strategic plan for more than a decade. Beginning in 2019, the organization adopted the following annual operational priorities to guide year-to-year budgeting and program alignment:

• Use data to guide decisions, program design, and communications
• Bolster statewide work, particularly for communities of color, individuals living on low incomes, counties and towns in rural areas, small arts and cultural organizations, and communities highly impacted by mass incarceration
• Attract new and continued investment
• Raise Illinois Humanities’ profile as the state’s humanities organization
• Build internal capacity to support coherent, high caliber, and impactful programs

Since 2019, we have been explicitly cultivating core competencies including:

• An equity-informed, partner-centered approach
• Evidence-based decision-making
• Impactful community convening
• The ability to recruit, cultivate, and support a diverse and aligned team of staff and board

We have also launched new programs (like the Foreground Rural Initiative) and strengthened our internal capacity (by, for example, creating new positions and revising our organizational chart). It is from this foundation that the strategic planning process was launched.
THE PLANNING PROCESS

Key Takeaways • Unique Contributions • Opportunities to Consider • Alignment and Vision

In 2022, the board voted to undertake a strategic planning process that would support staff and board to collaboratively develop consensus on the vision, mission, and values of the organization; be grounded by the organization’s commitment to antiracism and equity, diversity, and inclusion; outline goals and objectives to guide short, medium, and long-term impact priorities that drive positive social change; and be informed with meaningful input from a variety of stakeholders.

This is the first strategic planning process Illinois Humanities has undertaken in more than a decade. Underpinning the launch of this planning process was the belief that the plan must build and strengthen work and approaches already underway, namely:

• Widespread, deep relationships throughout the state
• Compelling, unique content
• A growing understanding of the contexts in which humanities organizations operate
• Data about where organizations are located, what they’re working on, and what support would be beneficial
• Leveraging our particular and unique position

Illinois Humanities’ strategic planning was grounded in a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) assessment; local, state, and national landscape analysis; and a listening tour with grantee partners, program participants, peer organizations, and funders. The listening tour included board and staff focus groups and eight interviews with external partners, program participants, and funders. The strategic plan was also informed by participant and program data collected through other organizational evaluation efforts. (External Stakeholder Assessments and Landscape Analysis available upon request).

Key Takeaways

• Illinois Humanities’ audience is strongly comprised of humanities practitioners and stewards, and each of those has their own audience.
• Small and community-based humanities organizations and programs leverage Illinois Humanities to build relationships with one another, gain visibility, and gain resources.
• Programming and grantmaking that includes convening creates space for timely public conversations and helps build community among different constituencies is of great value. This is particularly the case in places and within communities that may be overlooked in the arts and cultural sector, including communities of color and rural communities.8
Unique Contributions

- Undoing narratives that segregate and separate (i.e., urban vs. rural)
- Bringing program participants into conversation with one another
- Engaging audiences who aren’t historically engaged by the sector: people of color and indigenous people, rural communities, people impacted by the carceral system, people who do not already view humanities as part of their lives
- Making connections across the state that are otherwise unlikely: urban, suburban, and rural; across sectors such as higher education, regional planning and economic development, and tourism
- Thoughtful relationships with faculty at universities/teaching institutions and with high school teachers

Opportunities to Consider

- Specific demographic and geographic communities: Latinx, Indigenous Americans, youth, seniors, suburban residents
- Specialized practitioners: K-12th grade and out-of-school-time teachers, veterans, faith communities
- Participants and partners who do not know how to access other parts and programs of Illinois Humanities
- Other sectors, notably: tourism, environment, planning, economic development, government

Alignment and Vision

Between October 2022 and October 2023, through a series of facilitated workshops and many small working group meetings, board and staff of Illinois Humanities re-embraced our mission statement and emerged with a new vision, values, strategy, and goals.

The vision is clear: An Illinois where the humanities are central to making the state more just, creative, and connected. The strategy is grounded: Champion a humanities ecosystem that makes Illinois more just, creative, and connected.

The priorities are specific and values-driven: We will achieve this through a partner-centered, data-informed, values-aligned approach to delivering on our mission by creating programs to address timely issues, amplifying statewide public humanities programs and practitioners with support and visibility, connecting organizations with one another and across diverse sectors, and promoting the importance of the humanities for our state’s wellbeing. This will require investments that enable our organization to be financially sustainable and resilient.

Bringing our vision into being will require a robust, vibrant, statewide cultural infrastructure supported by diverse sectors and communities. Strengthening the existing ecosystem of which we are part, while bringing visibility to the diversity and value of the humanities in action in Illinois is the first step. Our five-year strategic plan is intended to position Illinois Humanities to do just this.

WHAT IS CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE?

Cultural infrastructure is a network of physical, social, and institutional resources that support and facilitate the production, dissemination, and consumption of culture within a society.

- **Places** — institutions that serve as repositories for collections and displays, venues for performances and events.
- **People and relationships** — the social capital created by individuals and groups who gather, connect, and exchange ideas.
- **Platforms** — including digital ones — for disseminating and archiving content and information; and for providing engagement opportunities.
- **Funding and policies** — that enable, incentivize, and sustain institutions and initiatives.
Our unique role as the state’s champion for the humanities is more relevant — and urgent — than ever before. The plan that follows is a five-year road map that will take us through and beyond the announcement of our 50th anniversary in 2024 and set us on a strong path for our next 50 years.

**Our Mission**

Illinois Humanities is a statewide nonprofit organization that activates the humanities through free public programs, grants, and educational opportunities that spark conversation, foster reflection, build community, and strengthen civic engagement for everyone in Illinois. Founded in 1974, we are the state partner for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

**Our Vision**

An Illinois where the public humanities are central to making the state more just, creative, and connected.

**We Value**

- Centering people’s experiences, histories, and cultures.
- Actively promoting equity, uplifting diversity, and ensuring inclusion.
- Making and protecting space for the exchange of challenging ideas, meaningful dialogue, and personal reflection.
- Intentional, partner-centered relationships that build social capital and strengthen social cohesion, particularly for underserved and historically disenfranchised communities.
Our Strategy

Champion a statewide humanities ecosystem that makes Illinois more just, creative, and connected.

We will achieve this through a partner-centered, data-informed, values-aligned approach to delivering on our mission by creating programs to address timely issues, amplifying statewide public humanities programs and practitioners with support and visibility, connecting organizations with one another and across diverse sectors, and promoting the importance of the humanities for our state’s wellbeing. This will require investments that enable our organization to be financially sustainable and resilient.

Our Priorities

• **Invest in Illinois Humanities** to be a financially sustainable, resilient organization, with well-supported staff and board members who work in alignment with our mission, vision, and values.

• **Create public programs** that leverage the humanities to address timely issues, support the current and next generation, and strengthen the state’s civic fabric.

• **Amplify public humanities organizations and programs** to ensure historically underserved communities not only receive support but are also informed about available opportunities.

• **Connect statewide humanities organizations and practitioners with one another, and across diverse stakeholders and sectors**, to build community and capacity across the cultural ecosystem.

• **Promote the importance of the public humanities** in making people’s lives better and our state more resilient.

Our Timeline

Over the next five years, we will bring our plan to life using a phased approach towards healthy growth in staffing, revenue, program delivery, and regranting. Guided by our values, our explicit commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion, and our strategic priorities, we will actively invest in the development of staff, systems, and data-informed decision-making to support progress towards our vision.

1. **Phase 1: Strengthen Our Foundation** (approximately 2 years)

   Phase 1 is the crucial starting point in our strategic plan. Our focus during this phase is to strengthen our existing foundation by filling open and understaffed positions to invest in a well-supported team and continuing to support an equitable and empowered work environment. During this phase we’ll assess and align existing programs, practices, and tools with our vision.

   We expect to maintain programming at 47% of the budget, with grantmaking at 13% of the total budget. At least 50% of annual grant dollars will amplify organizations and individuals operating in small towns and rural communities, and programming led by and/or serving communities least likely to have consistent access to the public humanities, including communities of color, adults living on low incomes, and communities impacted by mass incarceration. By the end of Phase 1, we will establish baseline impact measures to guide our quantitative benchmarks for Phases 2 and 3.

2. **Phase 2: Level Up** (approximately 2 years)

   Phase 2 will be characterized by our ability to regularly measure and transparently report on impact against Phase 1 benchmarks. Pending adequate resources, we will increase grantmaking as a percentage of the overall budget, and increase our capacity to use data to inform program design, research, and ecosystem strengthening. During this phase, we will invest in partnership and marketing efforts to promote our vision. We anticipate we will need to assess and refine digital, media, and relationship management tools. By the end of Phase 2, the organization will have a solid foundation in place with clear goals for Phase 3.
Phase 3: Sustain and Scale (1-2 years)

Phase 3 marks the scaling and sustainability phase. As we enter Phase 3, we will have clearly solidified our impact, profile, and role as a vital engine strengthening Illinois’ cultural ecosystem. The benefits of expanded staffing and strategic research partnerships will equip us to readily promote and demonstrate the value of Illinois’ humanities ecosystem to the state’s well-being. Key characteristics of this phase include the following hallmarks:

- We are regularly employing an equity lens and contextual data to create specific programs and initiatives that contribute positively to making the state more just, creative, and connected.
- We are connecting humanities organizations through hubs that serve as robust, recognizable nodes in the cultural ecosystem.
- Grantmaking comprises at least 20% of our overall budget.

3 Reporting and Transparency

Transparency and accountability are core principles of our organization. We will regularly review progress through a board-approved, dynamic impact dashboard. The Executive Director will utilize quarterly board meetings as key opportunities to share progress, discuss outcomes, and reflect on adjustments. Our website will serve as a public platform for sharing impact updates and the lessons we’ve learned along the way. We will consistently evaluate our vision and strategy by asking, “How are we doing, and how do we know?” to ensure that our actions align with our values and goals, and that we are making a meaningful impact in Illinois.

Financial Model

This plan calls for careful, considered, phased growth with a continued emphasis on a partner-centered and responsive program approach. If the organization grows at the pace it has over the past three years, it is reasonable to expect that over five years we may grow from a 21-person staff with a $4.7M budget, to a 31-person organization with an anticipated $8M operating budget.

Over the course of this plan, we will work towards a budget that reflects the following priorities and investments:

We anticipate the largest portion of revenue growth needed to support this plan will come from an increase in traditional philanthropy (namely, private foundations and corporations), accompanied by more modest increases in individual giving and government funding. In support of our goal of sustainability, we plan to diversify revenue with the addition of an earned revenue line, developing our capacity to engage in mission-driven, contract-based work, such as pursuing government requests for proposals that would enable Illinois Humanities to serve as an intermediary grant maker and program provider. By the end of Phase 3, this revenue will contribute at least $400,000 (5%) towards overall revenue on an $8M budget.

By engaging stakeholders, leveraging data, fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion, and focusing on program development and evaluation, we will strengthen a thriving humanities ecosystem that fosters dialogue, reflection, community, and civic engagement. Continuous improvement and adaptability will be essential to ensure lasting impact and progress toward an equitable and vibrant state for all.
APPENDICES

Acknowledgements • Examples of Humanities Organizations in Illinois

Acknowledgements

Board

Board Strategic Planning Working Group
Susan K. Eleuterio, Juana Guzmán, Bridget Hayman, Rikeesha V. Phelon, and Jai L. Winston.

Executive Director
Gabrielle Lyon

Staff
Fairouz AbuGhazelah, Rebecca Amato, Alyssa Bierce, Jane Beachy, Madeline Cruz, Michael Foley, Vicki Garza, Mark Hallett, Morven Higgins, Joanne Hsu, Kurt Kindt, Martin Krause, Karen Loda, Matt Meacham, Willy Palomo, Hannah Sugarman, Zerline Thompson, Robert White, and Tia Williams.

Examples of Humanities Organizations in Illinois

Community Arts organizations: Examples of grantee partners in this category include 6018|North, The HUB Arts and Cultural Center, Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods, Gillory Institute dba Silk Road Rising, the Chicago Latino Theater Alliance, and OPEN Center for the Arts.

Cultural and Ethnic Organizations: This category includes organizations dedicated to the study, preservation, and/or dissemination of the history and culture of ethnic groups. Examples of grantee partners in this category include American Indian Center, Haitian American Museum, African American Museum of Southern Illinois, Ukrainian National Museum, Midwest SOARRING Foundation, Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, Garvey Tubman Cultural Arts and Research Center, and Robbins Historical Society.

History Organizations: This category includes historical societies (and their support organizations), historical preservation groups (and their support organizations), historic houses, folklore/folklife organizations, place-based learning organizations, cultural sustainability organizations, and other organizations with a historical focus. Examples of grantee partners in this category include: Bronzeville Historical Society, 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House, Bishop Hill Historic Site, History Center Lake Forest-Lake Bluff, H.O.W. History on Wheels, Jacksonville African-American Museum, Les Amis du Fort de Chartres, McLean County Museum of History, National Cambodian Heritage Museum & Killing Fields Memorial, and New Philadelphia Association.

Staff Strategic Plan Working Group
Fairouz AbuGhazelah, Rebecca Amato, Madeline Cruz, Gabrielle Lyon, Morven Higgins, and Jenn Yoo.

External Partner Interviews
Ellen Placey Wadey, Angela Rudolph, Kevin Lindsey, Claire Rice, Jeanne Schultz Angel, Xavier Ramey, Jaime Poorman, and Christophe Ringer.
Humanities Education: Organizations that offer classes, seminar, and workshops in the humanities (which include but are not limited to literature, languages, history, philosophy, religious studies, art history, and interdisciplinary humanities programs — like ethnic studies, gender and sexuality studies, and American studies). Examples of grantee partners in this category include Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project, Chicago Freedom School, and Black Alphabet.

Humanities Museums: This category includes organizations that acquire, preserve, research, exhibit, and provide for the educational use of works of art or objects/artifacts that are related to the study of humanities content. Examples of partners in this category include Katherine Dunham Centers for Arts and Humanities, American Writers Museum, Atlanta Public Library and Museum, Alton Museum of History and Art, Ethnic Heritage Museum, Lawndale Pop-Up Spot, and Western Illinois Museum.

Libraries and Archives: These organizations include operating libraries and archives (excluding those that are purely science- and medicine-focused). Combination museum-libraries can be treated as museums or libraries. Examples of partners in this category include Lithuanian Archives Project, Read/Write Library, Chillicothe Public Library, Marshall Public Library, and Illinois Library Association.

Literature Organizations: This category includes organizations that promote the study or appreciation of books and/or literature and the promotion of literacy. Examples of grantee partners in this category include Guild Literary Complex, 826CHI, Chicago Books to Women in Prison, Metro East Literacy Project, Chicago Poetry Center, Liberation Library, and MAKE Literary Productions.

Media, Journalism, and Documentary Organizations: Organizations that are committed to covering humanities themes and/or telling the stories, happenings, and histories of communities that are informed by the members of those communities, challenge predominant narratives, and/or nurture critical analysis of media. Examples of grantee partners in this category include: 60 Inches from Center, South Side Weekly, Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, Kartempquin Educational Films, Cicero Independiente, Contratiempo, Full Spectrum Features, Minds Eye Radio, and Strategy for Access Foundation.

Consortiums, alliances, collectives of humanities organizations. Examples of grantee partners in this category include Chicago Cultural Alliance, Landmarks Illinois, Illinois Association of Museums, and Chicago Collections Consortium.
ENDNOTES

1 National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965 (P.L. 89-209); retrieved Oct. 6, 2023, neh.gov/about/history/national-foundation-arts-and-humanities-act-1965-pl-89-209


3 Ibid, 6.


5 Molly Scott et al., Community Ties: Understanding What Attaches People to the Place Where They Live (Miami, FL: Knight Foundation, 2020), 24-25. knightfoundation.org/reports/community-ties-understanding-what-attaches-people-to-the-place-where-they-live/.


8 Available upon request: External Stakeholder Assessment and Landscape Study.

Graphic Design: Sarah Sommers Design, sarahsommersdesign.com

Visit our website to learn more.

125 S Clark St #650, Chicago, IL 60603   |   312.422.5580
ILhumanities.org   | @ILhumanities