

Illinois Humanities Council Site Assessment

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Introduction

Gail Leftwich Kitch, Executive Director of By the People for MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, and Jim Veninga, Campus Executive Officer and Dean, University of Wisconsin Marathon County, joined NEH's Federal/State Partnership Senior Program Officer Kathleen Mitchell in conducting the Illinois Humanities Council Site visit, May 15-17, Chicago, IL. Gail previously served as Chair of the Massachusetts Humanities Council and as the Executive Director of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, and Jim is the former Executive Director of the Texas Council for the Humanities. The following report, written jointly, summarizes our review of materials provided by the IHC prior to the site visit as well as the many conversation that took place over two and one-half days in Chicago.

We were well prepared for the visit. We found that the Self-Assessment Report, submitted by the IHC to NEH April 4, 2007, was an extraordinarily honest, reflective, and comprehensive review of the Council and its work. We found a remarkable consistency between this document and what we observed and learned through the conversations in Chicago. The IHC should be congratulated on the high quality of this report.

Now in its 34th year, the Illinois Humanities Council (IHC) is, like the city in which it is based, vibrant, sturdy, and welcoming to all. The e-mailed observation of a Council supporter which was shared with us during our visit could not be more apt: "The Illinois Humanities Council is doing great things to bring back the substance of conversation to the general public." It is an institution committed to using humanities to let people think together which uses its programs and activities to build-bridges and make connections.

During the course of our site visit we had serious, frank discussions with IHC Executive Director Kristina Valaitis, IHC staff members, the bulk of the Executive Committee of the board, and representatives from a broad cross-section of council 'stakeholders," the council's name for those they serve and benefit, and a telling detail of how the Council perceives its work. The following report draws on these conversations as well as the report itself.

The Context in Which the Council Works

"Incredibly complex" could be a good description for the broad political, social, ethnic, cultural, and geographic context in which the Council does its work. The report and our conversations point to the challenge that organizations that provide services statewide face in seeing the state "whole." The urban/rural split (less than 1% of the population lives or works on a farm, yet farmland accounts for 76.8% of the total land), the upstate/downstate reality, the wealth/poverty equation (12% of Illinoisans live below the poverty level), the cultural resources of the Chicago area compared to some other parts of the state, have all presented realities to be dealt with.

What we discovered is that the IHC has, with a high degree of conscientiousness and creativity, succeeded in seeing the state "whole." It has crafted a program that responds to this diversity as

it seeks to make the humanities “a part of everyday life” and to promote the civic importance of reflection and the active exchange of ideas. Page four of the report summarizes the three roles that IHC has chosen to play in the state.

- The IHC *produces* humanities programs and resources that support ongoing public engagement with the world of ideas.
- The IHC *enables* others to create public humanities programs.
- The IHC *advocates* the civic importance of humanities.

The multiple and effective ways in which the IHC serves as a producer, an enabler, and an advocate became clear through the site visit. The IHC does indeed, to use a phrase from University of Chicago historian of religion Martin Marty, exist within, and helps influence, a “web of associations” to enrich individual lives and the civic life of the state through the humanities. The metaphor of the web captures one of the most central features of the IHC: its perception of how it is related to, how it draws strength from, and how it further enhances, the multiple associations that can enrich the state of Illinois and make the humanities an important dimension of every day life of its citizens.

Humanities Benefits and Services Provided

In establishing its goal to foster a culture in which the humanities are a vital part of the lives of individuals and communities, the IHC has endorsed three significant values: the humanities belong to everyone; the humanities enrich our quality of life; and the humanities enable us to be full participants in public life. The past work of the Council, its strategic plan for the future, and its major objectives for 2007-2012, all document the extent to which these values have infused the work of the IHC as it seeks to achieve its core mission.

The IHC has with great success developed specific programs and initiatives to achieve specific objectives.

- *Future Perfect, The Public Square* (including Café Society, Civic Cinema), and *Capitol Forum*, successfully broadens public involvement in the humanities and enhances civic dialogue and reflection.
- *Museum on Main Street* exhibition programs, *Road Scholars* speakers bureau, the remarkable *Odyssey Project* (and with its nifty Spanish dimension), *Teacher Programs* and its *Grant Program*, provide remarkable access to the humanities in a very complex and diverse state.
- *Justice Talking, Velosophie*, and the *Literature and Medicine* program, along with other efforts, have worked to “increase or expand humanities activities in unexpected places.”
- The Council’s awards programs, its multiple collaborations with other organizations, its remarkable website (www.prairie.org), its co-sponsorship of programs with other agencies and entities, have worked to “deepen and expand IHC’s role in championing the civic importance of lifelong learning in the humanities.”

Through all these undertakings, we were particularly struck by the IHC's profound commitment to access. To see the beneficiaries of IHC programming as "stakeholders" provides a different orientation because that counters the way in which the benefit of the humanities, whether in academic or public settings, have often been thought of. This term is not used lightly by the IHC, and one can learn much about the exercise of leadership through partnership within an equalitarian framework, by looking at the work of the IHC.

The IHC creatively struggles with the relationship between council-conducted projects and the more traditional grant-making role. The balance currently achieved seems to be working well. We note the continued importance of IHC grant-making in "injecting" the humanities into a variety of projects around the state. At the same time, its own initiatives and projects are helping the council to achieve its mission. All activities, whether through grants or through Council projects and initiatives, reflect the Council's variety of creative approaches to the question of access to the humanities. This came through in all our conversations with the "stakeholders" One participant noted: "IHC has built bridges between places which are usually isolated," noting especially connections between university and community as well as between community organizations.

A number of the participants noted how humanities projects have helped re-shape the missions of organizations—ways of envisioning what the organizations are about. IHC's support for and assistance with this work has proven to be a kind of capacity-building for the grantees and demonstrates ongoing potential for council success in this area. One of the issues raised by board leaders was that of whether or not the Council should be making some grants that are more related to capacity-building than to specific programs. This is an important question, one that reflects the extent to which even the more normal kind of grant-making has impacted the self-understanding of various organizations and pursuing this new direction might be possible if additional public funding becomes available.

We observed much praise for the humanities scholars involved in public programs. Grantees, directors of specific initiatives and council projects, and others noted the extent to which the IHC had been successful in involving quality scholars from throughout the state in the public work of the IHC. And some of this work is beginning to be recognized by peers and senior level university administrators as serious intellectual engagement that merits consideration for retention and promotion, thus moving beyond the normal way of viewing public work—as simply service to the community. In one case, course-release time was provided for a scholar to be involved with the *Odyssey Project*.

Here are a few observations from our conversations that demonstrate the diversity of benefits to the state from particular efforts.

The *Free Street Theatre* demonstrates an important aspect of IHC activity—the commitment to support collaboration with diverse community-serving programs, enhancing "the web" of associations noted earlier.

The goal to provide "Humanities in Unexpected Places," to "get them in, get them thinking," is noteworthy. The *Literature and Medicine* initiative, a reading/discussion program offering

opportunities for health care professionals to reflect on the larger mission of medicine, is a prime example of the Council's creativity in expanding access and finding innovative ways of making the humanities a part of everyday life for as many citizens as possible.

Justice Talking/Meaning of Service draws from the richness of important readings from literature, philosophy, and religion to help AmeriCorps workers reflect on the meaning of their service. For this group of young American volunteers, this program provides safe space to have challenging discussions to talk as well about race and class in America, about opportunity, and other difficult issues. This project, as well as several others, points to the importance of the facilitator in achieving project success, especially with most text-based discussions, and this underscores the benefit of the council's expertise in working with organizations in securing these facilitators. We did observe that the Council might need to put a bit more emphasis on cultivating facilitators for *Justice Talking*—this will be important for sustainability. This might provide one more opportunity for closer work with universities—scholars can offer public humanities training, particularly to these young people, who are involved with public service. *Justice Talking* is a very important program, one that is now being undertaken by several humanities councils, and we salute the IHC in its remarkable leadership in developing this.

In regard to creating a network of scholars who believe in and practice public scholarship and are involved in public programs, one participant observed that the time might have arrived for the IHC to explore the possibility of establishing a center that would work with graduate programs in the humanities in the universities of Illinois to help these future professors become public scholars and to work effectively with diverse publics.

Numerous stakeholders documented the success of the Council in promoting civic dialogue, referring to an experience or program that created a context for discussion that otherwise would not have happened and that at the same time helped to frame an issue through the humanities in a way that otherwise would not have occurred. *Future Perfect: Conversations on the Meaning of the Genetics Revolution* is successfully introducing Illinois audiences to questions raised by the genetics revolution, and a very good example of how the IHC is demonstrating how the humanities can contribute to the discussion of very complex issues. *Future Perfect* involves year-long conversations on the theme or topic selected.

The creative networking of the Council and its commitment to civic dialogue can also be seen in the extraordinary project, *The Public Square*, which hosts public conversations about cultural, political, and social issues using a social justice framework. Here one sees the sophisticated and contemporary interpretation and practice of the long-standing commitment of the state councils to use the humanities in creative ways in dealing with difficult public issues. This effort models the civic dialogue of the sort that the IHC wishes to facilitate, and thus is one of the most important and successful activities of the Council. A newspaper article, an art exhibition, a new film that is released, a major public event—all these and more can be used as the springboard for a community conversation led by a humanities scholar. Public Square programs, such as Café Society and Civic Cinema, in effect are standing in for the Council, making the Council present, as meaningful public conversations that contribute to a more participatory democracy take place.

The Public Square demonstrates many of the core commitments of the IHC: providing programs that reach underserved and new (often younger) audiences, enriching the civic life of Illinois, and using all applicable means to reach these audiences (email blasts, website announcements, postcards, PSAs, and local/neighborhood publications). One participant noted the extent to which these programs were building “social capital.” Another noted the extent to which scholars involved in *The Public Square* represented the very best of the public humanities, with these scholars able to work with very diverse publics in very diverse settings. Another participant noted how these discussions “gave people a new way of thinking about problems,” empowering them in a new and very different way.

In an equally constructive vein, another participant urged even closer participation with local community partners as efforts are made to expand those who sit around this community discussion “table.” Entry into the discussion matters and how it is done contributes to the sustainability and legitimacy of the project—these dialogues happen in, and are of, the community. This is critical for the success of the Council—the recognition of different sources of knowledge-creation and the valuing of all. Thus the continued ability of the Council to remain open in securing partners and in identifying facilitators who recognize multiple publics is important.

Many of the participants in sessions held discussed how the work of the Council was building bridges between disciplines of the humanities, reconnecting the narrow, minimalist understanding of the humanities with a broader context. We found this to be true in many of the grant programs and initiatives and projects of the Council and we applaud the Council for its many efforts to promote multi-disciplinary use of the humanities on particular topics, themes, and issues.

The IHC successfully develops strategic partners to maximize its resources to achieve its mission. These partnerships can be found in council-conducted projects but also in its grant projects. During the past two fiscal years (2005-2006) IHC made 174 awards, releasing \$1,219,377 in funds, which were matched with over \$9 million in cash and in-kind support. Grants are ultimately mutually beneficial for the IHC and its grantees. The IHC views its relationship to a grantee as one that involves a partnership, and the nature of this partnership can be found in very large grants (\$75,000 for the Chicago Humanities Festival) to smaller grants (\$2,000 to support an oral history project dealing with the South Asian community in Chicago, 1945-1965). Our conversation with one of the leaders of *History Makers*, evidences this commitment to partnering in a remarkable way. *History Makers* involves the development of an Afro-American History Archive. The IHC has partnered with *History Makers* many times in an effort to “mainstream African American history.” Both *History Makers* and the IHC have partnered with WBEZ Chicago Public Radio in its Chicago Amplified website. WBEZ has been notably successful in attracting a diverse public radio audience.

The same kind of partnering was seen in a very different kind of project, that involving the Chicago Metro History Education Center which received \$50,000 for a notable project in which 20,000 students in grades six through twelve create extended community history research projects. Students go far beyond their school libraries as they undertake this research, doing work in public libraries and historical societies. Papers are presented at local, regional, and state

competitions. The grant provides support as well for the teachers. The project director' remarks underscored the reciprocal nature of this relationship and how the project was developed in close consultation with the IHC.

Through our discussions with the grantees, we observed a growing sense of community that exists among all the grantees as well as those involved as partners with Council-conducted projects. And with this sense of community comes a desire to work together to promote the aims of the council. Grantees we visited with expressed a desire to meet other grantees and thought it would be a good thing for the IHC to bring grantees together once or twice a year to further this sense of community and to learn from each other. In mentioning this to Kristina Valaitis, we were informed that the Council was aware of this desire but that there were resource questions (time and cost) that made this prohibitive at this time. Should additional resources become available, this might be something for the Council to investigate doing.

It also should be noted that past grantees and council partners make themselves available to help potential grantees/partners access the Council—providing assistance with approaching the council, how to write successful grants, and how to reach targeted audiences.

Here are a few concluding thoughts regarding Council programs and services:

- The importance of capacity-building is inherent in the successful grant-making of the council: IHC acts as facilitator of connections between institutions and it successfully uses the grant program to access additional resources which helps a grantee position itself as a community institution. Its grant-making activity stimulates significant private sector support.
- There is remarkable coherence to IHC programming. This is a well-thought-out program, one that evidences remarkable sophistication in terms of use of resources. Programs and initiatives work together, and the Council successfully manages the diversity of its programming.
- In the words of one of the participants, “the Council is ahead of the curve” in dealing with difficult public issues. It has managed to find creative and substantive ways to deal with challenging topics and, equally impressive, to do so with very culturally, ethnically, and economically diverse audiences.
- We found abundant evidence that the IHC encourages scholars to work *with* the public as co-producers of dialogue and knowledge.
- The IHC recognizes that there are multiple publics, and that the humanities in their universality can relate to these multiple publics, and its programming has done that.
- There is widespread recognition among its grantees and other partners that the Council is building community in diverse but highly successful ways.

Council's Management and Organizational Effectiveness

We appreciated immensely our conversation with board and staff. Ample time was reserved for conversations with members of the Board's Executive Committee, the Executive Director and other members of the staff, and other Board members as well.

We were struck by the extraordinarily positive relationship of the board and staff and of the common understandings that shape the work of the Council.

The success of the IHC and the public perception of genuine accomplishment have led to an ability to attract highly qualified, energetic board members, individuals who bring with them broad professional backgrounds, lots of enthusiasm, an array of skills, and an ability to get things done. The Board also has developed a solid process for determining leadership.

Unlike some state humanities councils, the IHC Board still reviews major grant proposals and that seems to work well, uniting the board in a common endeavor and in providing a window on the needs across the state. The grant review process is central to coherence of the board, builds collegiality, and appears to be a defining characteristic of the IHC Board. Staff provides commentary on the grants, but it is the Board that reviews and decides, and this works well.

The Board has worked closely with the Executive Director on all aspects of council initiatives, and it feels strongly about the importance of the high quality of governance at a time of increased scrutiny of nonprofits. The Board leaders we visited with had carefully read the Self-Assessment Report and noted that it accurately documented the work of the Council.

The Board seems content with the current roughly 50/50 balance of grant program and Council-conducted initiatives, particularly given the different purposes each element serves. There is some interest in looking at the potential for increasing grant award levels which have remained unchanged for a while. They also recognized that Council-conducted projects and other initiatives created a more engaged staff, providing exciting, intellectually demanding, and very rewarding endeavors that balance the more routine areas of grant administration. The strength, vibrancy, and significance of Council-conducted programs also reflect growing Board confidence in the staff's ability to run the Council's own programs.

We found a remarkable staff, individuals who brought to their assignments extraordinary sets of skills and interests. Their dedication to the Council's mission came through in all of our conversations. We applaud their work which evidences the finest characteristic of both humanistic endeavor and public service. The admiration of the staff for Executive Director Valaitis, and the confidence that they have in her, was readily apparent. Kristina provides a model of servant leadership at its very best. "I think I have the best job in the state," she told us, and her enthusiasm for and dedication to the work of the Council were abundantly evident.

Indeed, all of our conversations with grantees and partners underscored the high quality of the staff and the growing reputation of the Council statewide. To gain such recognition in any state is quite an accomplishment, but in a state as diverse as Illinois, it is remarkable. We were struck by the focused, thoughtful efforts of the staff at cultivating audiences for all its programming and

we learned that this commitment is deeply appreciated by the Council’s grantees and partners and undoubtedly has contributed to the growing recognition of the IHC.

The staff noted that one of the frustrations they face stems from the fact that needs and opportunities cannot adequately be addressed with the resources available. They dislike having decisions about programs and project ideas constrained by the availability of resources. The timing of federal funding and recent budget delays has been especially frustrating.

Kristina’s work has evolved in recent years, with less time spent on politics/NEH issues, and more time on the Council’s important work. Yet she noted that more time was now being spent on personnel matters as the program and staff have grown, and she recognized, and we concur, that one consequence of growth is a kind of bureaucratization, the need for larger administrative structure. To continue to do her job well, fewer people may be able to report directly to her. Some additional layers of accountability may be needed, with fewer people reporting to the Executive Director. This will allow the Executive Director more time for public engagement and working with the Board on high priority leadership items.

The staff has historically driven programs—the Board reviews and approves all initiatives and projects and then “weighs in” as specific endeavors unfold—but everyone seemed to agree that it is important to have staff do the driving. The Board does not need to invent programming but members have the opportunity to participate through ad hoc committees which oversee programs and/serve as visiting committees for particular initiatives such as the *Odyssey* project and *Public Square*.

We asked the staff: How is the work of IHC done with such apparent success and ease? How does this happen? Here are their answers:

- Collaboration, mutual commitment, and retention of flexibility are essential to the Council’s undertakings.
- It is vitally important to have the support of the Board.
- We have to have the ability to seize opportunities, to be willing to grapple with hard/challenging issues associated with taking on difficult topics.
- “All ideas and all people are welcome.”

Some challenges were noted by board and staff, and these are worth mentioning here.

- Communication, given the breadth of programming, is demanding; hence, how to keep up with what is happening internally and externally is a challenge.
- They recognized the need to stay focused given the breadth and depth of programming. With this comes a recognition that a Council can’t do everything, and that priorities have to be continually set.
- Growth brings with it particular challenges. Organizing the staff in such a way as to minimize inevitable bureaucratic tendencies, while optimizing potential for effectiveness and efficiency, present ongoing challenges as well as opportunities.
- There is an increasing need to be explicit about connecting programs to the Council. With dispersal of programs, projects can have their own identity, and thus there is a need to be

careful to maintain awareness of the institutional home of these many endeavors so that the Council is credited for the work it does.

We spent considerable time discussing with board and staff the financial status of the Council and financial development endeavors. We applaud the extent to which the IHC has been successful in expanding its work through state and private sector support. For the fiscal year that ended October 31, revenues totaled \$2,498,340, which included \$970,000 in state support and \$293,236 in contributions and earned income.

Executive Committee members noted that there are three legs to the financial stool upon which the program sits: federal, state, and private. The third leg (private sector and individual giving) could be stronger, yet they have gone about financial development in a very careful manner, taking “incremental steps” as one member put it. While annual giving is up, as is individual support, development efforts are under review and there is some uncertainty about future directions. Indeed, under consideration (a rather lengthy one, we might add) at the present time is a decision to proceed with hiring a senior person as part of revamping development efforts. The Board is involved with this through a reconstituted Institutional Development Committee, combining development and public affairs responsibilities. The goal is to move from fundraising tied to a specific program (where the Council has had extensive success) to fundraising for general purposes, cultivating commitment to the Council. The board will need to determine how it wishes to proceed on this. The financial development effort needs a “driver”—the Executive Director can’t assume that role. Hence the Council faces this question: How much should the Council invest in its financial development effort?

We appreciate the deliberativeness with which the Council is proceeding in answering this question. While there is undoubtedly opportunity to expand individual giving, we would not want the Council to short-change itself in not fully recognizing how very successful it has been in generating significant private sector support for the important projects that it has taken on. The sponsorships of Motorola and Boeing for *Future Perfect*, the support of the Field Foundation and academic partner organizations including the University of Chicago, UIUC, and Northwestern for the *Odyssey Project*, the support of the Joyce Foundation for *The Public Square*, the McCormick Tribune Foundation support of *Capitol Forum*, and the very important private sector support for numerous grant projects, all point to a state humanities program that is achieving remarkable private sector support.

Finally, we need to note the observation of one board member, that if there is one “patentable” idea for the Council it is that of flexibility, a willingness to step outside the paradigm, as demonstrated by the IHC’s ability to promote the statewide reach of council programs and projects. This flexibility, the ability to recognize needs and respond to opportunities, has become a hallmark of the council. It has also become the means for sustained success with state funding, and this is no easy task in a state as crowded with competing cultural and educational institutions as is Illinois. That flexibility is also evident in the exciting and compelling story of the Council’s building up, acquiring and shedding programs in response to opportunities and changed circumstances. Indeed, we were impressed by the strategic, nimble decision-making reflected in its incorporation of *The Public Square*, a past grantee which had an audience the Council sought (younger) and presented opportunity to fill a programming vacuum, into the IHC.

A few concluding observations on management and organization effectiveness:

- As noted, there is recognition (Kristina, staff, board) of the growing management and administrative challenges associated with growth (and success!); we support the idea raised by Kristina for the Council to bring in a consultant to help address this.
- The reported Board experience—its ways of working and thinking through issues—models the best of the humanities, and this says something very important about the environment created at and by the Council. At the IHC there is enormous respect for each other's expertise and a valuing and sharing of expertise and insights.
- The relationship of Board and staff seems clearly defined, with responsibilities understood by Council and staff members alike.
- This is an impressive Board—senior leadership people—with outstanding credentials. This is a staff not afraid of board strength. There is staff recognition that the stronger the Board, the stronger the Council, and hence, the stronger the staff.
- The Council will need to resolve issues related to financial development—private sector, individual giving—but both Board and staff seems to be on the same page in regard to the kind of thoughtfulness that needs to go into this.

Summary

The IHC is a remarkable institution. We applaud the board and staff on its many accomplishments. Thirty-five years ago, as the first state councils were formed, we doubt that anyone could have quite envisioned what has unfolded in the State of Illinois. It has become an important partner on behalf of the citizens of the state, in enriching hundreds of thousands of lives, in enhancing the work of hundreds of educational and civic organizations, in deepening and expanding public dialogue, often in unexpected places, in building community, and in helping the citizens of Illinois envision their future. With growth and achievement come special challenges, not the least of which is priority-setting and continued expansion of financial and human resources to meet new needs and opportunities. With its rich history and many accomplishments, the IHC is well poised to respond to these challenges. We leave this assignment to assess the work of the IHC with strong conviction that the public humanities are alive and well in the Prairie State.