



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

FEDERAL/STATE PARTNERSHIP
Kathleen Mitchell
Senior Program Officer

1100 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, NW
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506
SUITE 603
KMITCHELL@NEH.GOV
202.606.8302, 202.606.8365 (FAX)
WWW.NEH.GOV

August 18, 2007

Kristina Valaitis
Executive Director
Illinois Humanities Council
17 N. State Street, #1400
Chicago, IL 60602-3296

Dear Kristina:

Following the July meeting of the National Council on the Humanities, I am sending you the consultants' report based both on Gail Leftwich Kitch's and James F. Veninga's review of the Illinois Humanities Council's self-assessment report and other materials and on their observations during their site visit to IHC in May 2007. This letter points out some of the visitors' comments along with those of the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and his staff, and of members of the National Council on the Humanities. It also reflects the observations of those of us in Federal/State Partnership who see the work of the Illinois Humanities Council through the lens of the national program.

First, however, I would like to thank you and your colleagues for all the work you are doing to promote the public humanities in your exciting and diverse state.

Goals for assessment and review: NEH, the National Council, and Federal/State Partnership intends that the assessment and review process will encourage councils to be as strong and effective nonprofit organizations as possible, and to produce the finest possible humanities programs and services for the citizens of their states and jurisdictions. NEH particularly encourages all state humanities councils to continue to expand their funding sources beyond NEH; to make sustained progress on diversity issues, broadly defined; to find even more ways to share information about common challenges and potential solutions; and to continue to focus on the development of strong and well-functioning boards.

Creative leadership: The Illinois Humanities Council exercises its leadership "through partnership within an equalitarian framework" and considers its beneficiaries to be its "stakeholders." The Council is committed to "creative networking" and civic dialogue, and exercises a multidisciplinary approach to the humanities. Its successful involvement of quality scholars in its work is applauded by the community organizations with which these scholars work. Importantly, the public humanities as supported by the IHC is beginning to be recognized in the academic world "as serious intellectual engagement that merits consideration for retention and promotion." The Council's work is characterized as follows:

- capacity-building is inherent in its grant-making
- its programs and initiatives enhance each other

- in the words of a stakeholder, “the Council is ahead of the curve” in dealing with difficult public issues, engaging very culturally, ethnically, and economically diverse audiences
- IHC scholars work with the public as co-producers of dialogue and knowledge
- its programming acknowledges that there are multiple publics
- its constituents recognize that IHC builds community in diverse but successful ways

Strong board, strong Council, strong staff: There is an “extraordinarily positive relationship of the board and staff.” The board consists of “senior leadership” members with “outstanding credentials.” It reviews major grant proposals, considering this work to unite it in a common endeavor while giving it “a window on the needs across the state.” There is “recognition that the stronger the Board, the stronger the Council, ... the stronger the staff.” The staff consists of “remarkable” people with “extraordinary” skills and interests. As executive, Kristina Valaitis provides “a model of servant leadership at its very best.”

Challenges: The Council’s growth and success presents management challenges inherent to a large entity. Kristina’s idea to hire a consultant to advise her how best to manage growth, primarily in terms of administrative structure and staff compensation, is strongly supported. Organizationally, the IHC needs to decide how to handle financial development. The sustainability of *Justice Talking* could benefit from parlaying IHC’s positive position with universities into the cultivation of facilitators.

From the Federal/State Partnership perspective: Federal/State Partnership affirms and supports all the observations and recommendations made by the site visitors. The Illinois Humanities Council is a complex organization carrying out intricate and finely targeted activities throughout a large and complicated state. It works across generational lines and draws in people of wide-ranging ethnic, educational, and economic groups. It has as sophisticated and high-powered a board of directors as any council within the network, and its staff incorporates both longevity and freshness of approach. IHC has successfully spun off the Chicago Humanities Festival and nurtured it to a state of full independence and success. It recently adopted The Public Square in an organizational merger. Energetic engagement of people and ideas characterizes all its work. It makes it all look easy. Were one to identify the model humanities councils, the Illinois Humanities Council would be close to the top, if not at the top, of any such list. It is at the heart of many activities and organizations around the state, touching many different kinds of people with powerful ideas.

The self-assessment and review process: This letter forwarding the site visitors’ report is the final stage in the Illinois Humanities Council’s 2007 assessment process which began with its submission to NEH of a self-assessment report based its mission and statewide position; its constituents, services and benefits, and results; and its organizational governance and management. A team of outside consultants, selected by NEH in consultation with the Illinois Humanities Council, then conducted a two-day site visit to Chicago and wrote a report of their observations and recommendations. This report, along with comments from NEH staff representing Federal/State Partnership, the grant-making divisions, and the Office of Grant Management, was reviewed by the National Council on the Humanities and the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Kristina Valaitis
August 18, 2007
Page 3

The self-assessment document is part of the annual reporting that state humanities councils are required to submit to NEH. The self-assessment process is meant, however, not only to be informative to NEH—which has to ensure that an “adequate” humanities program exists in each state and jurisdiction—but also to be meaningful to councils as they face the challenges of the future and the needs of the citizens they serve.

Looking toward the future: Compliance plans are submitted by the Illinois Humanities Council each year, 2008-2011, no later than June 1. On June 1, 2010, in addition to the compliance plan, a narrative interim report will be due. This interim report should connect IHC’s current work with the 2007 self-assessment and site visitors’ reports. In 2011, the assessment process will begin again.

The staff at NEH values the time and effort you and your colleagues devoted to preparing the self-assessment report and carrying out the site visit. We in Federal/State Partnership would very much appreciate hearing any thoughts you may have about the conceptualization of this process or its execution. As always, we stand ready all the time to lend any support or assistance that you might consider helpful.

On a personal level, I want to tell you how honored I am that I was able to be part of the site visit to the Illinois Humanities Council. My perspective has always been that it is one of the very, very best of the state humanities councils. I wanted to have a chance to see it on the ground and in action. What a pleasure and professionally gratifying experience it was to spend parts of three days with you in May. Chicago is a city I have known well and loved since I was a teen-ager. You and your colleagues gave me a whole new view of it. Thank you so much.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Mitchell
Senior Program Officer

Copy: Arthur Sussman
Enclosure: Consultant’s Report