

Humanities Washington Site Review Report

Site Review: March 16-18, 2021 (conducted virtually)
Site Reviewers: Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko (Illinois State Museum)
Diane Kelly-Riley (University of Idaho)
NEH Representative: Meg Ferris McReynolds

Introduction

The virtual site visit to Humanities Washington (HW) took place March 16-18, 2021. The site visitors were Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Diane Kelly-Riley, Ph.D. Ms. Catlin-Legutko is the director of the Illinois State Museum. Dr. Kelly-Riley is an associate professor of English and the vice provost for faculty at the University of Idaho. Catlin-Legutko and Kelly-Riley were joined by Margaret Ferris McReynolds, senior program officer for the Office of Federal/State Partnership at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

The continuing pandemic prohibited visits to actual sites and the meetings were held via Zoom. HW arranged meetings with board members, staff, stakeholders, and partners. Since HW serves a statewide constituency, the virtual format actually facilitated robust and lively discussions that enabled participation from all corners of the state that would not have occurred if the site visit had been held in person. HW prepared thorough and well-documented materials that provided a solid foundation for the site review.

Since the last site visit five years ago, HW has continued to thrive and evolve its exceptional programming, initiatives, and partnerships that serve its mission and the people of the state of Washington. During this time period, HW has prioritized initiatives of diversity, equity, and inclusion in all of their operations. They launched the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions and reorganized program staff to facilitate more efficient reporting lines. Likewise, they pivoted smoothly and effectively at the onset of the pandemic and continued to provide excellent programming throughout the state during the on-going crisis. In some cases, the shift to a virtual format enabled HW to extend its reach to a broader state audience than the previous in-person format allowed. As it enters its fifth decade, HW is positioned to continue its mission to “open minds and bridge divides by creating spaces to explore different perspectives.”

Context in which the Council Works

HW facilitates several core programs: the new Center for Washington Cultural Traditions, *Think & Drink*, *Washington State Poet Laureate* program, *Prime Time Family Reading*, and *Speakers Bureau*, as well as a small grant program. These programs have statewide reach and representation. They also partner with other organizations as relevant. For example, as part of its Mellon-funded project, *Re: Building Democracy*, HW partners with public radio stations to explore America’s commitment to the democratic process.

HW’s programming is responsive to the needs and interests of its residents. That is, the programming has been developed with both the geographic and demographic aspects of the state of Washington in mind. The organization serves constituents statewide across a sizable space of more than 71,000 square miles and a population of 7.6 million residents with the majority of the population on the west side of the state. Washington State’s urban areas are generally progressive

and the rural areas tend to be more conservative. The far western side of the state is generally more politically/socially liberal and more ethnically diverse. Central and Eastern Washington are largely rural and agricultural, and its residents are predominantly white and Latino. The Olympic Peninsula is also rural and its economy is dependent on the harvest of natural resources such as logging and fishing. Urban areas continue to have an influx of immigrants, primarily from Asia and Latin America. The Russian population is also growing in Seattle, Spokane, Bellingham, and Vancouver. In Central and Eastern Washington, the Latino population is growing, now over fifty percent in Adams, Franklin, and Yakima Counties. There are twenty-nine federally recognized Indian tribes. Twenty percent of Washington households speak a language other than English at home. More than eighty percent of HW's work falls outside of the Seattle metro area in partnership with schools, museums, libraries, and other community-based organizations. Because we held our site visit virtually, we observed significant participation from urban and rural groups across the entire state. **HW's state-wide reach is impressive.**

Washington State, particularly the Seattle area, is at the leading edge of implementing broad racial equity reforms. The cultural sector leads in this area, and the staff and boards of predominantly white-led organizations are being held to increasingly higher standards around diversity, equity, and inclusion in their operations, leadership, and programs. **Throughout our site visit, HW's priority to address racial equity and inclusion reforms were strongly evident both in terms of commitment and in terms of leadership structures and programming.** That is, HW actively and vocally supports diversity, equity, and inclusion goals and the effects of their commitments were observed across all of conversations with leadership and constituent groups.

During our site visit, we met with the executive director, board members, and staff members. Additionally, we met with individuals involved in three of the five main HW programs: *Prime Time Family Reading*, the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions, and the *Speakers Bureau*. In spite of the fact that our site visit was done virtually, we felt that we were able to get a much better sense of the scope and reach of statewide activities than we would have if in person in Seattle, Washington.

In our initial meeting, Executive Director Julie Ziegler provided an overview of HW and the various directions of each of the major programs. These generally fell into three categories: on-going effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; initiatives to support diversity, equity, and inclusion; and accomplishments of on-going programming. These three themes continued in our conversations with constituent groups. Ms. Ziegler outlined the significant ways in which HW had to pivot because of the global pandemic. She noted that the pandemic afforded HW an opportunity to interact with their constituents in a much broader way. While they may not have made the changes they did had the pandemic not occurred, there were observable program benefits across all areas and initiatives. Likewise, Ms. Ziegler detailed the ways in which HW prioritized initiatives focused on racial equity and inclusion and these efforts were underway within the operation of the organization as well as in the way that the various programs were offered.

The Effect of the Pandemic

The global pandemic disrupted all operations, but HW handled the challenges with creativity, flexibility, and aplomb. Their initial efforts focused on the distribution of two waves of CARES Act grant funds to assist non-profit organizations supporting the humanities. The **staff adjusted quickly to working remotely and provided creative leadership and vision about the ways in which the programming needed to evolve.** This was **evident across all levels of leadership at HW** and it was

impressive to note the ways in which HW programming assumed different formats that in many cases served more of its constituents than when the programming was limited to in-person activities. While their traditional program offerings were disrupted, HW pivoted with remarkable grace extending the reach of their program offerings and modifying their programming to meet public health and safety regulations, but to also continue to produce engaging humanities programming. Much of this programming was vitally important to residents--particularly families with young children--as a way to mitigate the stresses of social isolation. The *Cabin Fever* and *Cabin Fever Kids* projects, in particular, received accolades for providing discussion topics for people experiencing the lockdowns and quarantines. This effort received a 2020 Schwartz prize from the Federation of State Humanities Councils. In-person programming efforts that may have had 30-50 people in attendance swelled to more than 300-400 people through virtual formats. When staff was asked how the pandemic transition felt, this sentiment was repeated by many: "Everyone worked with grace and creativity. Now we know we have the skills and can trust ourselves more." The pandemic enabled HW to see the possibilities of the expanse of the reach of their programs with the addition of virtual programming.

HW's subsequent work focused on recovery and reopening of programming. Even before the pandemic hit, the broader environment for the humanities has been challenging as many federal programs lost funding due to changing political contexts. For many other humanities focused organizations around the nation, the pandemic presented serious challenges to their organizations. HW has been able to continue its important humanities work. **The next five years will focus on continuing to grow and improve HW programming and integrating innovations in program delivery that resulted from the pandemic.**

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

HW has made diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) a priority in its staffing and leadership as well as its programming. **The commitment to DEI was observable in concrete actions throughout our conversations with various constituent groups.** The hiring practices of the staff reflected these priorities. The board described that it had changed the ways in which they nominated membership to the board to facilitate a more diverse representation. Previously, there had been a required financial commitment to become a board member; HW revised these requirements and now has a board that reflects considerations of race, sexual orientation/identification, geographic location, urban/rural location, gender, and cultural traditions. The board members expressed a deep commitment to the priorities of DEI and, as a group, they were participating in a continuing educational and transformational process to ensure that their actions were transparent.

HW staff members also expressed a clear commitment to DEI priorities. They talked about ways in which they work intentionally with underrepresented communities in Washington State to address the needs of these groups who are often underserved in different ways. They also spoke about having transparent processes that set measurable benchmarks and held themselves accountable to reach these benchmarks. One staff member shared, "The majority of communities we engage with are underserved in many ways. Intentionality is critical. [I have worked in] places where the opposite is the norm. It is great to be in this space."

We met with representatives of three of the five major program efforts of HW and their commitment to DEI was also apparent. These efforts came in the form of diverse programming and materials and will be described in the following section.

Humanities Programming

During our site visit, we met with representatives from the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions (CWCT); *Prime Time Family Reading*; and the *Speakers Bureau*. It's important to note that HW was able to continue providing superior humanities programming during the pandemic.

Since the last report, HW opened the CWCT in partnership with ArtsWA and represents HW's second largest program. CWCT includes two major programs: *Heritage Arts Apprenticeships* and the *Cultural Traditions Survey*. These efforts are documented on the Center's website www.ritesofgreen.com. We met with representatives from two CWCT groups: storytellers and preservationists, and those involved in heritage arts. The storytellers and preservationists included a drag king located in a rural, coastal community in western Washington; a folklorist storyteller who runs a cultural documentation field school; a master in West African drum and dance who preserves and shares West African culture with youth and families; and a Filipino language and culture preservationist. The heritage artists included an Indian folk artist, a blacksmith, and a master indigenous Coastal Salish wool weaver. CWCT programming is addressing the isolation many of these marginalized groups have faced. It will be exciting to see the program's presence grow across the state.

The *Prime Time Family Reading* program made significant pivots due to the pandemic, such as developing a program model that could be delivered online. We spoke with participants from libraries, school districts, and connecting programs. HW continued to provide important programming connecting families and reinforcing the importance of reading together for success in school and life. These efforts were situated in urban and rural settings across the state and often had outreach with multilingual families. The pandemic challenged one of the core tenets of the *Prime Time Family Reading* program--which is sitting down during the programming to share a meal--this component was replaced with gift cards for grocery stores, supporting families for a shared experience while gathered together for online programming. The programming continues to evolve to meet the needs of different constituent groups, with a current focus on better outreach to rural communities and with families experiencing homelessness. The pandemic virtual programming presented challenges particularly to these groups due to lack of internet access. HW continued to serve rural populations and people who are homeless through collaboration with schools and libraries and through distribution of laptops and tablets to families in need. Several site visit participants commented that they observed DEI at work in the ways in which materials selected for the program represented the participating communities. Others noted that they would like to see more scholars of color participating in the program especially those who are fluent in languages beyond English.

In our last set of meetings, we met with participants from the *Speakers Bureau*. These represented people from museums, historical societies, colleges and universities, libraries, and speakers on the current roster. The topics selected were chosen because of their relevance to issues of the day and resonance with citizens of the state. HW employs a rigorous vetting process when selecting speakers. The format of the presentation was a welcoming inclusive space that facilitates speaker and audience participation. One benefit of the pandemic was that the attendance at the *Speakers Bureau* events has increased from in person attendance of thirty to forty people to 300 to 400 people attending online. Additionally, the speakers include experts who are often outside of academic contexts

emphasizing that people come to their expertise through multiple paths. Overall, program leadership was very strong.

Finally, we reviewed [Humanities Washington's Spark Magazine](#). This publication is a twice-yearly print magazine (also available online) highlighting many of Humanities Washington's authors, cultural experts and activities around the state. Additionally, the magazine provides updates on programming. *Spark Magazine* continued publication in the pandemic, another notable achievement, as many publications were delayed or cancelled because of the challenges of the pandemic.

The Effectiveness of Collaborations and Partnerships

Many strengths were in evidence during our conversations and the value of Humanities Washington collaborations and partnerships shined brightly. This is evident in the description above, and more specifically, HW is an organization committed to being a good partner through careful listening, planning, and execution.

Charted with a clear, streamlined strategic framework, HW's goals permeate operations and resonate with staff, board members, and the community. Designed as three pillars, the strategic plan's activation can be seen when talking with board members, stakeholders, and staff. Programmatic decisions visibly align with the plan and staff members create annual work plans to bring goals across each finish line. A staff member referred to the strategic plan as the "angel on his shoulder" as he makes decisions. The plan's success is further defined by how well new programs have launched through collaboration. For example, the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions (CWCT), in partnership with ArtsWA, has grown to be its second largest program and is wholly dependent on the effective engagement of external culture bearers across Indigenous and ethnic communities. Each interviewee from this program was able to share how transformative their participation is and what it means to the communities they serve.

As previously reported, more than eighty percent of the programming they do is outside of Seattle, and without partners the work could not happen. Each program participant and constituent interviewed could clearly articulate the impact and resonance of HW collaborations and programs across the state of Washington - rural and urban alike. The virtual site visit afforded us ample time to meet and hear from these individuals - each person on the Zoom calls could clearly express the value of the partnership to them and their communities, calling staff "accessible, super organized, clear, and responsive" and their interactions demonstrate that "everyone cares so much - helping with red tape and focused on engaging around real impact."

Now in the third year of this four-year plan, HW board and staff remain nimble for a COVID-19 reality. The plan empowered them to quickly pivot to remote operations and to expeditiously disperse CARES funding. HW is to be commended for dispersing CARES funds within ten days of decisions. Coming out of this pandemic era, it will be important for HW to use the lessons of virtual programming and fundraising to shape the next plan. More people are connecting to HW now because of virtual options and striking a balance between virtual and in-person connection will need to be a defining characteristic of HW's next few years.

With the mission *to open minds and bridge divides by creating spaces to explore different perspectives* HW simply could not expect to bring this statement to life without collaborative power.

One board member shared, “. . . with today’s reality, you might feel daunted by the mission, but instead I feel very hopeful about making impact.” HW is cognizant of the state’s geographic and demographic diversity and has carefully allocated resources to be accessible state-wide, while investing in the staff and board’s education around diversity and inclusion. This will serve them well and sets them apart from some humanities councils that struggle to reach across their state to connect with and serve diverse audiences.

The Quality of Operations

Continuing with other findings in this report, HW’s operational management is outstanding, ensuring sustainability and creating room for innovation. This is an important dynamic for an impact-oriented humanities council. The *About Us* page on HW’s website offers access to the staff and information on the board. The website also includes financial data and beautifully highlights their “so what” factor -- their impact. This level of transparency attracts donors and participants alike. The staff and board’s commitment to transparency regarding the council’s finances, processes, and decision-making demonstrate that HW employs best practices in nonprofit governance and operations.

The executive director and staff are highly qualified professionals who are committed to the mission of HW. During our site visit and in the materials provided, it is clear the staff is dedicated to delivering meaningful programming and support. Staff members are also listening and learning; when change is needed, they are willing to re-shape a program. For example, staff revised the book list to include more protagonists who are black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) to better reflect the communities that HW serves. With the *Poet Laureate* program, they took the necessary time to pause and evaluate the program to emerge with a revised orientation that has attracted a more diverse pool of candidates.

It is also commendable that internal promotions are nurtured, changing staff needs are well supported, and talents are valued (adapting to the CFO’s move to Montana is a great example). Since the last site visit, HW has hired a development officer to re-shape the CEO’s management portfolio for efficiency. They are making great strides in fundraising and engaging the board in development activities. As we emerge from the COVID-era this will certainly enable HW to grow capacity.

With the switch to remote work in 2020, the staff demonstrated they were highly capable at decentralizing their operations. It should be anticipated that many staff members will want to continue to work remotely or on a hybrid schedule. In addition to employee satisfaction, there are two additional outcomes of this transition. Future staff hires may be located across Washington state, outside of Seattle, and the costs of office space rental costs may be reduced. As a result, HW will be more connected state-wide and will be able to redirect overhead costs toward programs.

HW supports a healthy cycle of professional development; funding is made available to each staff member in alignment with their annual goals. Of equal importance, the CEO is supported in her leadership development efforts. As long-tenured as Ms. Ziegler is, it is important for the board to support professional development opportunities that help her stay energized and connected to the mission. The board chair needs to be the CEO’s greatest advocate for self-care and intellectual nourishment.

The organization's serious commitment to DEI training is commendable. Focusing on internal change first - individually, in teams, as board members - is the best way to transform any organization. When this sequence is ignored, change will not be sustained. We are highly confident that the DEI work they've started with an organizational strategy and design firm will serve them well. HW has already made geographic and demographic diversity top of mind; now it needs to transform process and action to remove barriers and to be more nimble and responsive to changing community needs. It will also be important to make sure board members are engaging in DEI at the same level staff are; so often boards and staff can get out of sync because of board resistance to DEI learning. We encourage HW to continue its current practice of open communication between board and staff.

The board carefully recruits new members to its body and supports succession into officer roles. They are also guided by a succession plan for the executive director making sure continuing operations are secure and collateral impacts are well understood in advance. The board recruitment process is stellar and focused on diversity of geography, professional background, and cultural/lived experience. This prioritization of qualities is in alignment with what it means to build an inclusive organization and the early success of this is evident in the commitment to DEI, the fluency of conversation around DEI during the site visit, and the commendable nature of HW programs. Each organization has growing edges - places where they need to concentrate learning until a new growing edge is found. A great observation was shared during the meeting with the Executive Committee, "[the board needs to] create structures and safer ways for BIPOC staff to raise issues when they come up...thinking as a small nonprofit there needs to be a way to create that. [It was also] suggested the board go through microaggression training to develop language and to have ways to interrupt and create a safer place." It was shared that the cultural value of niceness in Washington State makes it challenging to engage in difficult conversations as an organization. When an organization commits to DEI, as HW has, it can better describe the forces at play - dominance, White supremacy, racism, oppression - that keep us from building a better future. We recommend that HW continue to foster open communication, careful recruitment, and a commitment to training will help HW create a model board culture that other councils will be able to learn from and emulate.

At the core of HW's work is sound fiscal management and fundraising. Staffing and processes have been put in place so that the organization will have liquidity when external forces cause uncertainty (four to six months of operating expenses are kept in reserve). Board and staff alike spoke with warmth and enthusiasm for the online adaptation for the annual fundraiser, *Bedtime Stories*. Rarely do you hear so much excitement for a gala-like event, a testament to how well-aligned their fundraising efforts are with mission and programs. COVID-19 has impacted all nonprofits and will continue to impact future budgets; however, we are confident HW will navigate budgetary uncertainty with skill. As previously noted, the shift to a remote-work or hybrid environment could reduce operational expenses. We expect the development office will continue to see generous support from new and returning donors because of HW's relevancy and responsiveness to its audiences.

Finally, the strategic plan's operational connections were described previously and it's important to note that the plan is tangible throughout HW operations. Decisions are made with respect to the plan, resources are deployed in strategic ways, and staff commitments to the goals are evident. While the plan, and the past plans, was designed with evergreen goals, it is now recommended that the board and staff think beyond evergreen for the next planning cycle. So much was learned in 2020 and 2021, new, experienced board members are at the table, and diverse partners and stakeholders

are ready to be thought partners. How can HW have a deeper footprint? Where can HW intersect with larger societal issues, such as the great partnership with Mellon and public radio? Can HW continue with humanities-focused programming AND be a council that is committed to public service? This will require stretch goals and a careful balancing act to match current capacity and to provide a runway. Leadership will need to articulate a tangible vision that makes the board and staff rally. The board will need to calibrate its expectations to match available resources while they motivate the staff to excel. All parties will need to come together to articulate a theory of change¹ that helps everyone stay in sync and articulate a new vision for Humanities Washington.

Conclusion

After nearly five decades of a focused presence, HW is deeply embedded in the intellectual, cultural, and academic framework of Washington State. Through partnerships and operational integrity, HW provides essential humanities programming across the entire state of Washington reaching its diverse and geographically dispersed residents. HW admirably pivoted during the COVID-19 pandemic to be responsive to the issues of the day and **all programs in HW are well defined, well run, and represent cutting-edge humanities programming.** HW takes its role as a leader in the humanities seriously. The council works for all people and **uses the humanities to elevate important issues, including racial equity and inclusion.**

HW is to be commended for its superior programming, the intentional ways in which they work with constituents across the state, the continued evolution of programming to suit the changing needs of the times, and attentiveness toward the changing demographics of the state. Their five programs and their approaches serve the organization and the state very well. The establishment of the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions provides an exciting expansion of preservation and heritage activities and serves as a model for other state humanities organizations.

The written materials and conversations with HW leadership gave the NEH site reviewers confidence in HW's operations. We were impressed by the impact HW has on many different constituent groups across the state. HW's reach across the entire state of Washington to both urban and rural settings is impressive; additionally, their outreach to often underrepresented groups is also noteworthy. HW's efforts to be reflective and intentional about their approaches were evident throughout their documents and in conversation with the various groups with whom we met.

Because of its commitment to change and careful resource allocation, HW is clearly a model council. Conversations with staff, board, and community members were consistent with the mission of HW and their voices were almost interchangeable. **Everyone knows why they are there and why HW matters.** The council's visibility in the state is high and they are now poised for a more dynamic and meaningful future. **All councils could benefit from their example.**

HW is an experienced, connected, and engaged statewide advocate for the presence and value of the humanities in public life. **The organization fulfills its mission with creativity, intellectual vigor,**

¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation offers a great resource for developing theories of change. https://focusintl.com/RBM020-aecf_theory_of_change_manual.pdf#:~:text=Theory%20of%20Change%3A%20A%20Practical%20Tool%20for%20Action%2C,things%20that%20occur%20as%20a%20result%20of%20the

intentionality, organizational integrity, and a deep commitment to public engagement with the humanities.