

Understanding the Public Humanities Through the State and Jurisdictional Humanities Councils

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If defining the scope of the humanities has posed an evergreen challenge, finding the language to describe the *public* humanities may be even harder. More than just something to be studied, the humanities are meant to be practiced. So when trying to understand what it means for members of the public to practice the humanities, a sensible approach is to look to those practitioners most engaged in the field. In our current landscape, these practitioners include the fifty-six independent nonprofits that compose the network of state and jurisdictional humanities councils. Established in 1971 by Congress to make the humanities as accessible as possible, these councils have a significant impact on the cultural landscape of their states and territories, reaching 42.8 million people through their support of more than 5,100 local organizations with \$51 million in funding in 2024 alone.¹ In both the work they do every day and in how they define their work, the councils place the public at the center of their humanities engagement in a way that other practitioners—typically those working in academia—do not.

This research brief examines how state and jurisdictional humanities councils publicly define their work through mission statements, definitions of the humanities, and criteria for regarding someone as a humanities “scholar.” The humanities councils serve as microcosms of the broader cultural ecosystem in the field, making their work ideal for understanding more broadly what the public humanities entail.²

Engaging with the Term *Humanities*

Even though the field is central to their work, humanities councils rarely center the term *humanities* in their mission statements. Of the fifty-six councils, only fifteen use the word *humanities* in their mission statements at all. Instead, most focus on what can be

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achieved by participating in humanities activities, like forging connections between people of different backgrounds, exploring and understanding our shared human experience, and building civic engagement. For example, Arizona Humanities aims to build “a just and civil society by creating opportunities to explore our shared human experiences through discussion, learning and reflection.”³ The Hawai‘i Council for the Humanities also emphasizes connection between people and ideas “that enrich lives, broaden perspectives, and strengthen

communities.”⁴ The Northern Marianas Humanities Council focuses its mission on the people of the Northern Mariana Islands—specifically naming the Indigenous people of the commonwealth—while also attending to “enriching their lives through research, dialogue, programs, and publications.”⁵ The choice not to lean on the term *humanities* is not a turn away from the concept but instead a focus on what the humanities can do for communities.

Chuck Holmes, executive director of the Alabama Humanities Alliance (AHA), echoes this sentiment, noting that, although the term *humanities* does not appear in the AHA mission statement, the council is not dispensing with the idea but rather connecting with a public that may not be familiar with the term. Once people are in the door, engaging with AHA programming, councils have a prime opportunity to show them all that the humanities can encompass.⁶ David Pettyjohn, executive director of the Idaho Humanities Council, feels similarly: “Instead of saying we promote the importance of the humanities, it’s more relatable to say we connect people with ideas. . . . The humanities are all about understanding the human experience and rather than technically listing all those fields, the council chooses to focus on the importance of connection.”⁷

The humanities councils are aligned with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which provides most of their funding and has its own definition of the scope of the field. When Congress established the NEH in 1965, the founding legislation presented an outline of what the humanities would include:

The term “humanities” includes, but is not limited to, the study and interpretation of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of

the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.⁸

Among the states, twenty-one of the fifty-six councils use this definition to guide, at least in part, their own definition of the humanities, with some using this language word-for-word and others borrowing the list of disciplines named in the NEH’s legislation to contextualize their own description of humanities activities. Perhaps not even a majority of the councils rely on this definition because they are cognizant of the fact that the humanities as a concept is an ad hoc category rather than one based on a preexisting, well-established, and shared understanding.⁹ Ad hoc categories are context dependent and often constructed spontaneously in the service of a specific goal, so understanding them usually requires familiarity with that context. Listing academic disciplines and referring to them as the humanities is largely based in academic concepts and done for the purposes of grouping these disciplines under a functional umbrella. However, beyond the walls of academia, this context disappears, hindering an understanding of what engagement with the humanities means in public life.

When asked about the combined use of a list of humanities disciplines alongside a newly crafted definition of the humanities, Nashid Madyun, executive director of Florida Humanities, noted that the added focus on storytelling allows him and his staff to address multiple audiences and remove ambiguity around who they are and how they use the term *humanities*.¹⁰ Humanities Nebraska similarly combines the NEH definition with a much shorter “translation.” Chris Sommerich, executive director, remarks that Humanities Nebraska uses the NEH definition “for the more scholarly side of things, but beyond that people’s eyes just kind of glaze over.” They choose instead to focus on the idea that the humanities are all about exploring what makes us human. “That seems to resonate with the broader

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public, is easy for people to remember, and gets to the heart of it in a positive way.”¹¹

How Do the State Councils Define the Humanities?

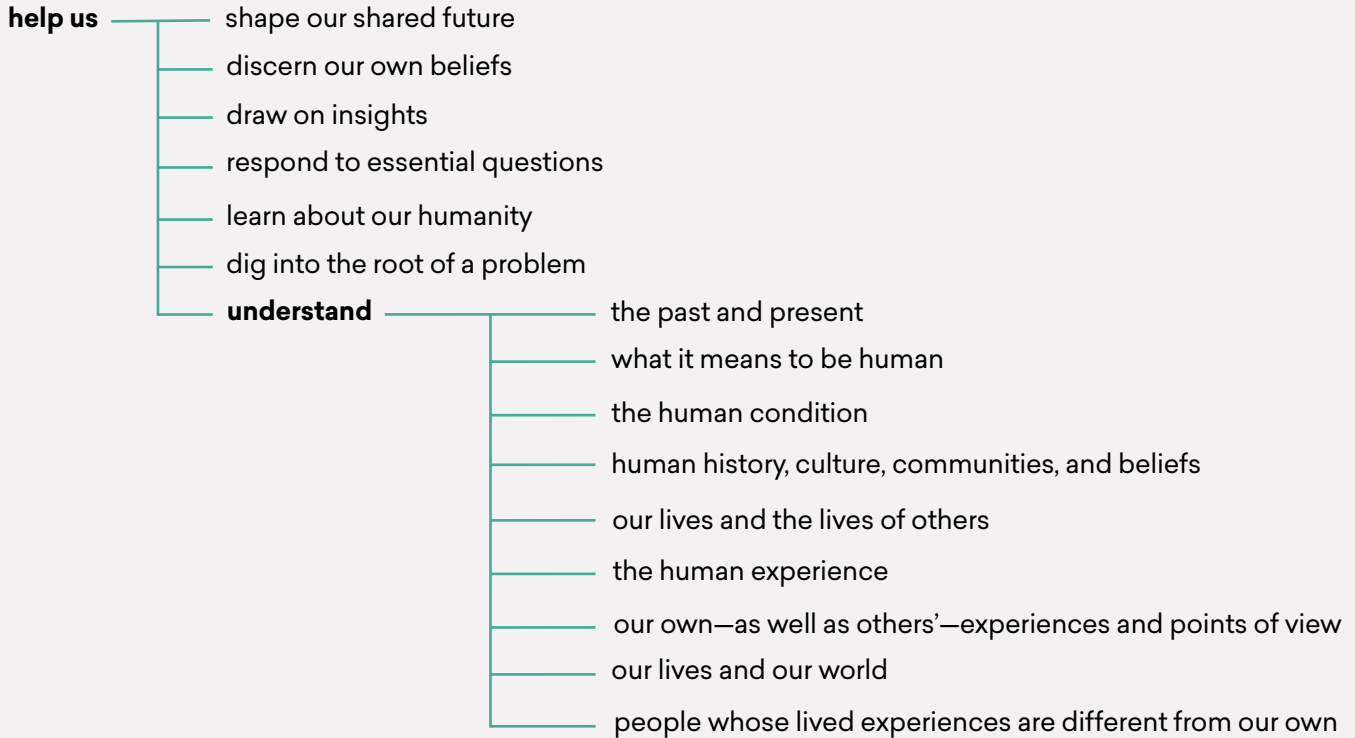
Through a simple text analysis of the humanities definitions provided by the state and jurisdictional councils, we can begin to get at what it means to practice the humanities in public life. To understand the *doing* of the humanities, we need to look at the active verbs being deployed by humanities councils. One of the most common verbs to appear across all definitions of the humanities is *understand*. According to the councils, the purpose of engaging with the humanities is to understand our shared past and present, what it means to be human, our lives and the lives of others, and people whose lived experiences are different from our own. *Understand* is often paired with verbs like *define*, *appreciate*, *express*, *interpret*, *evaluate*, and *connect*. Not only is the public meant to understand what makes us human; it is also meant to engage actively with that information, interpreting, evaluating, and using it to form meaningful connections. Other common verbs include *connect*, *think*, and *explore*. This stands in contrast to many academic definitions of the public humanities, which often center institutions of higher education as the primary agents of sharing knowledge and educating the public rather than emphasizing mutual participation that can foster a healthy civic life.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of an institution that centers its work on the public is that *help* is the most commonly used verb in councils’ definitions

of their humanities work. Appearing in conjunction with *help* is almost always the pronoun *us* (meaning everyone, not just the council), followed by another action verb, most commonly *understand*. By sharing with the public the tools needed not just to understand but also define, appreciate, express, interpret, evaluate, and connect, state councils are positioning themselves not as organizations presenting humanities knowledge to the public but as facilitators in the cocreation of humanities knowledge. Among the verbs and verb phrases collocated with *help* are *shape*, *discern*, *draw on*, *respond to*, *bridge*, and *dig into*. Each is an action the public takes when engaging with humanities content and activities. Thus, regardless of previous experience or expertise, when engaging with the humanities as defined by the state and jurisdictional councils, you are truly *doing* the humanities. Approaching the same question from the academic perspective yields a very different view on what makes public humanities work.

In their 2022 essay for a *Dædalus* issue on the humanities in American life, Carin Berkowitz, executive director of the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, and Matthew Gibson, executive director of Virginia Humanities, explore some of the differences between academic and public definitions of the humanities.¹² They note that academic engagement with the public humanities often involves first listing a series of disciplines that do not translate particularly well beyond the ivory tower and then conceptualizing the public versions of these disciplines as academics sharing their knowledge with various publics. While the councils have long worked with colleges and universities as partners in their work, they focus more closely on community-led

The humanities . . .



Source: Text analysis of the definitions of “the humanities” by State and Jurisdictional Humanities Councils.

humanities activities that build relationships across time and space. Berkowitz and Gibson note that public humanities work needs to be supported by higher education without being appropriated by it. However, many definitions of the public humanities from academia continue to center academics as knowledge producers and the university as the critical facilitator of the spread of humanistic knowledge.

Humanities Expertise and Academia

When the term *public humanities* first started to appear in the 1980s, it was deployed by academic humanists to push the boundaries of their research and teaching.¹³ While the broader goal of moving humanistic knowledge and skills among people remains, for academics it has never quite evolved

beyond the academy. Susan Smulyan, a historian and former director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Brown University, writes that the public humanities are collaborative, emerging specifically in collaboration between professors and students and between the university and the surrounding community.¹⁴ Smulyan also describes a more expansive public humanities as a process undertaken by collaborative groups, including university-level humanists, “with communities outside the campus.”¹⁵ While this second understanding of the public humanities nods more to the process of cocreation, it still draws a distinction between higher education and community-based groups without making space for humanistic discovery that involves no university faculty, staff, or students. Like other humanities scholarship, the public humanities create new

knowledge; however, academic notions of the public humanities position the public as passive recipients of that knowledge rather than as active participants in its creation, leaving the knowledge creation to people deemed experts by virtue of their academic expertise.

Similar ideas are expressed in a white paper on the subject produced by the North Eastern Public Humanities Consortium in 2015.¹⁶ At first the paper's authors appear to be more aligned with the state and jurisdictional humanities councils in how they conceptualize the public humanities: "Public humanities strives to locate, cultivate, and build upon commonalities through broadly collaborative practices of story-telling; of historical inquiry, recovery and acknowledgment; and of artistic expression."¹⁷ However, they continue with the notion that the public humanities embarks on these activities in an effort to recommit the American university to its publics and to serving as a community resource through its public-facing work. The authors note that one reason for urging this recommitment is the underutilization of higher education cultural capital in forging new community partnerships and allowing for space to challenge traditional concepts of expertise. While this is an important role that colleges and universities have played in public humanities work, only in academic definitions of this work is this kind of relationship centered.

The journal *Public Humanities*—launched in 2024—was founded as a space for specialists and nonspecialists alike to connect over and share humanistic knowledge. An open access journal featuring accessible writing, its stated mission is to create a venue for sharing knowledge about the intersections of humanities scholarship and public life. However, the journal's mission foregrounds "broader engagement across and outside the academy and to facilitate cross-disciplinary conversations." Additionally, the journal's stated value of education specifies sharing knowledge, "especially back and forth across the academia/public boundary." When discussing engagement, the journal's values highlight

"scholars who transcend traditional academic spaces to engage with society in active and new ways."¹⁸

Traditionally, the word *scholar* has been employed to mean someone with an advanced degree affiliated with an academic institution, a definition that aligns with the values expressed by *Public Humanities*. Often as part of their grantmaking or other activities, humanities councils will require the involvement of what they variously call a humanities scholar, expert, professional, or advisor. While the councils are clear that who typically counts as a scholar is someone with an advanced degree (e.g., M.A., Ph.D.), they explicitly make room for other forms of expertise. This was not always the case. As affiliates of the NEH and as recipients of significant federal funds for use in grantmaking, the councils have sometimes had to accede to the NEH's definition of a scholar—which focuses on having an advanced degree in a humanities discipline. The councils' more expansive definitions, which tend to be more responsive to the communities with whom they work, are today much more common.¹⁹

The West Virginia Humanities Council includes "community member[s] with extensive and documented life experience in the content area upon which the project is centered" as part of its definition of a humanities scholar.²⁰ Nevada Humanities states that it "recognize[s] that knowledge may be acquired differently in various cultures and value[s] such diversity of experience as consistent with our understanding of the humanities."²¹ Other councils look to tribal leaders and culture bearers. North Carolina Humanities acknowledges that a humanities scholar "may have developed a high level of expertise through immersion in a particular cultural tradition."²² Mass Humanities uses a broader definition of a humanities advisor, noting that "a humanities advisor is recognized by their peers for their expertise, or by a community as a bearer of its knowledge and traditions."²³ Someone with an advanced degree working primarily in a university position would be included under these guidelines, but so, too, would persons who possess other forms of expertise.

The Public and the Humanities

In eschewing academic understandings of the humanities, the state and jurisdictional councils are speaking to a public that generally understands the practice of the humanities more than the concept of the term itself. In developing a 2019 survey on the role of the humanities in public life, the Humanities Indicators polled 175 adults in the United States about their understanding of the humanities. A notable share of respondents connected the term to activities like giving blood, the fine and performing arts, and, in at least one case, the sciences (“because they are about human beings, right?”).²⁴ For the broader survey, when asked about specific disciplines and activities within the humanities, the public responded more favorably than when asked about the humanities as a whole. A 2025 report from Harmony Labs examining public attitudes toward the humanities in media similarly notes that, while humanities practices are thriving in public life, less than 1 percent of that practice is centered on the study of the humanities, focusing instead on forms of actively making sense and meaning.²⁵

The Harmony Labs report echoes the Humanities Indicators’ earlier prioritization of mode over discipline:

If the humanities are broadly conceived—as a set of humanistic practices and skills that may connect to academic study of humanities subjects but often are not necessarily part of the academy—you will find considerable engagement with and support for the field in the general public.²⁶

The state councils have been working with this understanding for more than fifty years. They position themselves as facilitators of this practice, choosing not to lean on the ad hoc category of “the humanities” that characterizes academic notions of the field and instead focusing on the practices of humanities work that are thriving in public life. In defining the public humanities, the state councils are meeting members

of the public where they are, putting them in the driver’s seat, equipping them with the tools they need to cocreate with experts in the field, and helping them master the skills that will allow them to make sense of their world and take an active role in composing it.

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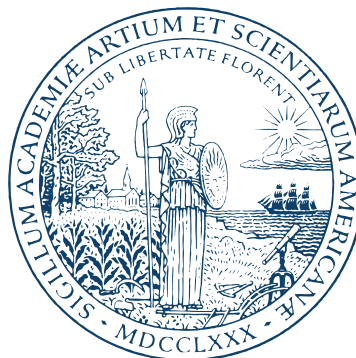
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