

Reframing the Public Humanities : The Tensions, Challenges & Potentials of a More Expansive Endeavor

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This essay assesses the so-called crisis in the humanities from the vantage point of the state humanities councils, looking at the richness and increasing diversity of public humanities work happening outside the academy. The essay posits that the humanities are flourishing in a variety of public spaces, where voices outside the academy are more effectively questioning what it means to commemorate the past and build in community and meaning through that process. But even with such work thriving, the humanities face challenges. Some of those challenges are related to definitional and communications issues in and between both the academic and public sectors. Other challenges are related to access and allocation of resources. While this essay does not pretend to have “answers” to these perennial issues, it suggests that both the academy and the public might benefit from and create more lasting and relevant impact from bridge-building that marries the expertise and knowledge from both communities.

We would like to begin this piece by situating ourselves. We spend a lot of our professional lives talking about how knowledge is local and rooted in one’s specific cultural perspective and experience, so we would be betraying a cause we espouse and care deeply about if we did not start out by telling you that our perspectives are biased and formed by our own trajectories. We are directors of state humanities councils: National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)–funded 501(c)(3) nonprofits devoted to the support of the public humanities on a statewide level. Those councils are charged with taking the humanities outside the ivory tower, building support for them locally, developing a model of those disciplines that feels relevant and worthwhile to the average taxpayer and to local lawmakers, and creating more participatory versions of subjects that are often studied in exclusionary ways. To do that work, we need to create bridges between academic subjects and a different kind of world, but also to identify what is wanting in the academic versions so that we can support it meaningfully elsewhere. We come to those roles shaped by complex backgrounds our-

selves: both of us have PhDs (Matthew in literature and Carin in the history of science) and know the scholarly world well, and yet both of us also need to be able to inhabit worlds like advocacy, fundraising, budgets, human resources, website development, community organizing, museums, and cultural festivals. Our vantage points are undeniably adjacent to and deliberately fashioned to be distinct from those within the academy's bounds. We are amphibians, moving between environments, though perhaps clunkier in moving through them because we cross boundaries. This is reflected in our arguments and our examples, which are very much those of two people occupying the liminal spaces, looking, sometimes with bemusement, at the spaces to either side of us.

We suspect that phrases incorporating the words “crisis” and “humanities” feel familiar to many readers. Assertions that the humanities are in crisis litter specialized newspapers and websites like *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the blogs of faculty members at elite universities, but they also permeate popular magazines like *The Atlantic*.¹ So what do people mean when they say that the humanities are in crisis? And are they right?

Writings that bemoan the decline and crisis of the *academic* humanities at four-year colleges point to a number of indicators: a steady and sometimes steep decline of undergraduate majors in areas such as history, classics, and English; faculty salary inequities in humanities disciplines compared with those in STEM departments; and even the shuttering of traditional humanities departments at some colleges and universities.²

It is useful in this case to note that when talking about perceptions of decline in the humanities, people seem to struggle a bit to define the thing that is in decline, in the end regarding the humanities as the nonsciences, and rarely defining the humanities using an underlying system of positive values or methods or subjects. That lack of a core explanatory system or epistemology, for a time, defined the crisis itself.³

Historian Benjamin Schmidt argues in a 2018 article in *The Atlantic* that although the descriptions of a crisis are long-standing, things have actually and meaningfully come to look like a crisis in the last fifteen years:

Almost every humanities field has seen a rapid drop in majors: History is down about 45 percent from its 2007 peak, while the number of English majors has fallen by nearly half since the late 1990s. Student majors have dropped, rapidly, at a variety of types of institutions. Declines have hit almost every field in the humanities.⁴

This does indeed sound like a crisis, but it is a very specific kind of crisis: it is a crisis for those faculty whose jobs depend on student enrollment at universities and perhaps a crisis for higher education and its fostering of the liberal arts. But one could argue that the crisis is limited to one very particular kind of ecosystem. One could even argue (provocatively) that such a crisis is akin to the crisis for coal

mining communities brought about by a switch to renewable energy sources. Is it a crisis for society? Is it even a crisis for those subjects of study rooted in the humanities? We are less sure of the answer to those questions.

What we do know, however, is that the humanities work being supported and created in the public sphere is not beset by these same challenges. This essay traces a flourishing and diversifying set of subjects and practices that we call the *public humanities*. This field of work is fraught with definitional problems that are similar to those of its academic humanities cousin, but not with the attending sense of deficit or crisis. In fact, the public humanities are in some ways richer and broader than they have ever been, more rooted in a form of knowledge construction that embraces people who have been systematically and historically excluded from the construction of the academic humanities: the public humanities are now socio-economically, racially, and ethnically diverse in their moments of construction and not just in their subjects of study or planned dissemination.

We alluded earlier to a need for a robust definition of the humanities. This is important if we are to understand the crisis in which they seem to find themselves – or, rather, in which academics find *themselves* in light of metrics such as the downward trends in humanities majors – and, rather separately, if we are to describe a world of public humanities that is not similarly suffering.⁵ The NEH itself provides one such definition:

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.⁶

Such a definition becomes a self-referential litany of academic disciplines with a half-hearted allusion to public engagement and relevance. When it comes down to it, as comparative literature scholar Eric Hayot contends, the academic humanities have a marketing problem that begins with the lack of a compelling core identity.⁷ While listing disciplines helps identify what the humanities are in higher education, they are not terribly useful when we go beyond the walls of the academy and into public settings. At their core, the public humanities are about relationships across time: with ourselves, with one another, with our built and natural environments.

So if we have a definition for the humanities – albeit a weak one – what then are the public humanities? Wikipedia, sometimes a useful starting place, defines the public humanities as:

the work of engaging diverse publics in reflecting on heritage, traditions, and history, and the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of civic and cultural life. Public humanities is often practiced within federal, state, nonprofit and community-based cultural organizations that engage people in conversations, facilitate and present lectures, exhibitions, performances and other programs for the general public on topics such as history, philosophy, popular culture and the arts. Public Humanities also exists within universities, as a collaborative enterprise between communities and faculty, staff, and students.⁸

This is a workable and workman-like definition, again resorting to some of the listing tendencies seen in the academic humanities. However, the use of the passive voice in “engaging diverse publics” suggests someone doing the engaging: perhaps a scholar, curator, or entity from the “federal, state, nonprofit and community-based” cultural sector bringing content knowledge to communities as passive consumers, not creators themselves. This is not to denigrate the value of this type of public or “applied” humanities, as it has sometimes been called. Much of the programming that state and jurisdictional councils produce follows such a path and there is distinct value in providing a platform for academic scholarship in the public interest.

But in another form, the engagement with “current conditions of civic and cultural life” and the knowledge and meaning derived through that public humanities work is created and led by communities rather than being created and led by scholars within the academy or nonprofit cultural agencies *for* those publics. This type of public humanities might be better understood as the *publics’ humanities*, and it is the sort that we have been working to foster in the humanities council network. If we are interested in this more expansive understanding of who makes up the world of public humanities, we must have a way of defining the work done by the public, who are themselves not tied to disciplines. We will explore possibilities for and challenges in such definitional work in this essay.

At the core of such a shift in thinking and in the expansion of the public humanities, and fundamental to this definitional exercise, are a number of fascinating and perhaps contentious questions. If the public humanities can be liberated from needing the role of the traditional scholar, mediator, or gatekeeper, as we suggest they can, what, then, counts as doing scholarship in this new context? Does the time that a genealogist puts into their research and written public output count as scholarship? Are tradition bearers and the holders and tellers of oral histories scholars? Is cultural activism scholarship? Politics? A mix of both? More pointedly, if the definition of scholar and scholarship and the work of the humanities and the public humanities are more open than what we have previously believed, how might resources *currently* allocated to the humanities and scholarship industry be allocated more equitably?

To better understand the roles that state and jurisdictional humanities councils play in the public humanities sector, it is useful to recount briefly the history of how and why these councils came into being and to convey some of the ways they currently engage grassroots humanities work across the country. The legislation that created the NEH and its sibling agency, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), underscores the public as the primary actor and stakeholder in the world of ideas. In fact, the very first of twelve declarations in the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act (1965) proclaims that “the arts and the humanities belong to all the people of the United States.”⁹

In its early years, the NEH was sluggish to heed this public emphasis, prioritizing instead matters related to higher education. According to historian Jamil Zainaldin, it was not that “NEH leadership opposed public involvement in the development of humanities programs as such; it is that they could not visualize programs originating outside these expert and professional domains” of the academy. Throughout the NEH’s history, we can see a marked division around how much the agency should serve the nonexpert public.¹⁰

Unlike the NEH, the NEA was quicker to embrace its public mandate by creating state and regional arts commissions to support artists and arts organizations at a grassroots level. Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI), one of the authors of the 1965 Arts and Humanities Act, was, according to Zainaldin, “puzzled that the humanities endowment’s leadership could not or would not grasp that state-based entities” would garner more public support for the humanities while also making it easier to “help you [the NEH] help yourself here on the Hill.” Pell’s comment underscores what was always a potential strength for the humanities: while in their more academic instantiation they could sound aloof and without clear utility, in the public they could better justify the use of taxpayer dollars for the agency. Seeing the writing on the wall, the NEH finally followed the NEA’s lead and in the early 1970s began creating a network of affiliate humanities councils across the nation.¹¹

Almost fifty years later, the work of humanities councils – what they actually *do* in supporting and creating public programming – is thriving, despite what is allegedly happening in the academy. We see this in Congress’s growing investments in public arts and humanities. We see it in expanded engagement with and access to public programming at book festivals, folklife performances, and increased use of and referrals to digital public scholarship resources such as podcasts and state and regional online encyclopedias. Critically, we also see the growing vitality of these programs. And outside council walls, we see the public humanities on full display in our strident, politicized, and racialized contests over national history and narrative, sometimes with tragic results.

Since 2014, Congress has steadily increased appropriations to the NEH and the NEA. While it might be misleading to call these increases “net gains” if one adjusts

these numbers for inflation, steady annual increases underscore that members of Congress on both sides of the aisle value the humanities and the public humanities, especially.¹² Thinking back to Senator Pell's argument that investments in public humanities would help the NEH help itself on the Hill, appropriations grow because organizations such as the Federation of State Humanities Councils and its humanities council membership educate elected officials year-round about the impact that council programs and grants have in states, districts, and territories. Even if congressional representatives differ in where they see the value of the NEH and the public humanities, they are often drawn to the work of nonpartisan state and territorial councils because these organizations visibly and directly support the activities of constituents they serve.¹³

Councils have been long-time partners of institutions of higher education, amplifying research and ideas from within the academy to the general public. From council-created online state and regional encyclopedias to radio programming and podcasts, this work creates access to thematic and place-based scholarship that provides informational value and contextual relevance in people's daily lives.¹⁴ Councils also create and support public programs such as book festivals and speaker series that bring writers, historians, and thought leaders to public audiences every year, virtually and in person.

While these are all forms of the public humanities that come *from* the academy or emanate from within humanities councils, as we mentioned before, the best versions of the public humanities – the real “grassroots” humanities – are created by publics, not merely for them. Too often when scholars have talked about public versions of disciplines they have meant merely that their wisdom would be understood by or distributed within a public. In its more radical form, however, the public humanities ask instead for the academy to give up its ownership of knowledge creation (see public historian Denise Meringolo's essay in this volume for one specific example of cocreated work in the public humanities; it is notable for its eloquent discussions of the potential of this kind of work, as well as of the hard work necessary to upend power dynamics, build trust, and create new knowledge through genuine partnerships between academics and communities). The humanities council network is a place to look for the sort of public creation of knowledge to which we are referring because they were initially founded not to do their own programs, but to be agile and responsive to aid local, “bottom-up” (that is, nonacademic and noninstitutional) versions of the humanities with grants. That local humanities work is deeply intertwined with people's lives, their politics, their communities, and their cultures. In New Jersey and Virginia, humanities projects by the people have taken many forms; some examples might help illustrate this kind of work.

A group of residents in one New Jersey town discovered that a number of local institutions, including a street, were named after a judge who had been involved

in using his judicial authority to sell free Blacks in New Jersey into slavery in the Deep South in 1818. That group developed a committee and a project involving local church leaders, members of the local Black community, and a small number of faculty from Rutgers who happen also to be members of this community to document the names and lives of those who were sold, to petition to remove the name of the judge from the town's structures, and to build a permanent memorial to the tragedy in a state that often regards itself as free of the taint of slavery. The project has grown since its inception, creating educational materials, building new community ties among people who are involved, and holding widely attended public events. The group is also writing history. Through research, they have developed a list of 137 victims (as of the summer of 2021) and have found biographical details about many of those men, women, and children. Sometimes that history can even be traced and tied to contemporary lives. The act of resurrecting names and ties, of participating in the difficult process of creating that history, has helped to make real for participants in the project the severing of family bonds and the elusiveness of family history for African Americans. The New Jersey Council for the Humanities (NJCH) did not conceive this work, nor did it direct any aspect of the project, and it does not claim ownership of the knowledge or outcomes of this work; but through its grants program, the NJCH helped to fund this project.

In another example, when Peggy Scott and Charlotte Brody learned of their local school board's decision in 2017 to consolidate Benjamin Franklin Yancey Elementary with two other schools, the two residents of Esmont, Virginia, knew they had to do something to recognize the school's namesake and what the school's legacy meant to the local Black community, lest that history be forgotten. When the county board of supervisors moved to make the Yancey school into a community center, Scott and Brody, who had attended the school in the early 1960s, saw their opportunity and began to work on how they could tell and commemorate that history for this new space. Without forming an organization or their own nonprofit to do it, Scott and Brody led the development and installation of the B. F. Yancey Heritage and History Exhibit, exploring Benjamin Franklin Yancey's life and the story of Black education in the community. Even though the Virginia council provided a grant to support the creation of the exhibit, the idea, work, and execution were purely the result of two public residents who wanted to make sure that the display "would give the opportunity to talk about how there were people in the days before us that wanted to see these [Black] children educated."¹⁵ Working with a historian to help collect oral histories in the community and research primary documents from local libraries and archives, the story highlights the educational journey of the building dating back to Reconstruction and the work of Benjamin Yancey to build and run the first school for Black students in the area.

Earlier, when we discussed the idea of "liberating" the humanities from the academy and institutional power structures, we asked what a more equitable al-

location of resources might look like. In this context, it is unsurprising that people of color led both of the projects described above and that these projects address racial inequity and bring into question who owns and creates knowledge. But even if humanities councils are better poised or have more desire to support a more equitable distribution of resources for grassroots public humanities work, councils still run into a wall of restrictions imposed by federal and state funding sources that pose significant barriers to entry. While federal and state governments should seek to ensure taxpayer funds are spent responsibly, corporate governance structures demanded by federal agencies also limit the ability of humanities councils to authentically engage grassroots efforts.

Our case for the robustness of the public humanities in great part depends on demonstrating that the humanities not only exist but exert considerable influence in the unruly and undisciplined spaces beyond the classroom, beyond peer review, and even beyond structures of federal grant-making. We recognize the risk in making such an argument: that we lose the thread and define the public humanities such that suddenly everything is included, and they therefore lose meaning. But we believe there is a consistent and expansive philosophical core to the humanities that can describe the work and be appreciated in both academic and public settings.

Looking at our national headlines over the last few years – disputes over what to do with monuments and building names; the 1619 Project versus the 1776 Commission; defining history education as critical race theory in America’s classrooms – it is curious that the academic humanities are in such crisis when debate around the nation’s narrative and history, and who controls how that story is told, is so heightened and the stakes are so high. While some of the terms have shifted, this is by no means a new debate. In exploring contests over monuments in U.S. history, public monuments scholar Kirk Savage explained in 1997:

Today we are acutely aware of public space as a representational battleground, where many different social groups fight for access and fight for control of the images that define them. Recent controversies over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, the John Ahearn bronzes in the Bronx, and the Arthur Ashe statue in Richmond... have put the problem on the front page of newspapers and in the halls of government.¹⁶

Public space continues to be the clearest battleground of meaning making. But instead of fighting to dictate and control which permanent images represent the singular “us” of a pluralistic society, publics are more often embracing organic content creation and curation. This is where we see some of the most vibrant and pure forms of the publics’ humanities.

In the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, for instance, communities – mostly of color – created ad hoc memorials across the nation. At the Minneapolis inter-

section where Floyd was murdered, community members erected parking barriers and constructed what would become George Floyd Square both to memorialize him and to tell the story of the enduring legacy and effects of racism. One year later, the city of Minneapolis began to remove the barriers around the square to enable traffic flow while also committing to preserve certain aspects of the public art and content created at the site.

During that same summer in Richmond, Virginia, people focused their acts of memorializing and protest on Monument Avenue's Robert E. Lee statue. With spray paint, placards, and signs, what had been constructed in 1890 as a vestige of the Lost Cause and message of White supremacy was gradually transformed into a living monument connecting that history to the contemporary moment. Both a public art installation and publicly curated history exhibit, the site was now dedicated to telling the biographies and stories of Black people killed by White people and police. The small circle of grass on which more than 150,000 mostly White people had erected a statue 130 years before was now transfigured by a hand-painted sign honoring a young local Black man also killed by police, reading: "Welcome to Beautiful Marcus-David Peters Circle, Liberated By the People, MMXX." At night, using the statue as canvas, an artist projected onto the monument images of Black agents of change, from Harriet Tubman to Representative John Lewis, Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Du Bois. Recognizing the power such a reclamation brought into public space and life, an image of George Floyd being projected on the statue became the front cover of *National Geographic's* annual edition of "A Year in Pictures."

In New Jersey, there were similar transformations of statues across the state, sometimes through graffiti, sometimes through the obscuring of statues of Christopher Columbus and George Washington, whose fleeting presence in various towns across the state has long been the rationale for placards and statues.¹⁷ But then new statues were erected as well; unlike the organic and ephemeral collection of tributes, emotional notes, and items of remembrance in Minneapolis, the city of Newark, itself with a history of racist police violence, was gifted, from artist Stanley Watts, a seven-hundred-pound statue of a welcoming George Floyd, sitting on a bench, to be placed in front of City Hall. The city embraced the gift of the statue, making it a project of commemoration that was fundamentally tied to government, but it was vandalized within a week of its installation.¹⁸ Debates over the narrative of our national history, sometimes violent in nature, are taking place in the streets of our country, in both sanctioned and unsanctioned ways. We want to assert here that they too are an expression of the public humanities, and that they have no ties to authorizing bodies like the academy or government funding agencies.

Beyond being powerful expressions of racial injustice, these types of public humanities activities raise a number of fascinating questions. First, are they "the hu-

manities” at all, or are they expressions of social activism and protest? If we define the public humanities as work that engages “diverse publics in reflecting on heritage, traditions, and history” and their relevance “to the current conditions of civic and cultural life,” then it seems these activities do just that, *and* they are also expressions of social justice and protest. If we then posit that these “unofficial” monuments are public expressions of the humanities, how do we as “professional humanists” – academics, museum curators, humanities councils – come to terms with them when, for our work, we rely typically on the permanent, or near permanent, preservation of things: their archivability, retrievability, researchability? How do works that embrace ephemerality and fluidity fit into a more discipline- and methods-based humanities ecosystem when, like street art, these utterances are living and invite layering? And, perhaps, finally, what happens to these expressions when they become sanctioned by the state (understanding that the state, here, represents all forms of institutional power), for example, when the City of Minneapolis commits to preserving aspects of George Floyd Square? Who will be invited to help choose what is preserved? Does the retroactive sanctioning of such work dilute the power of the original act of public creation and spatial disruption?

We believe that these questions should be difficult to answer, and we do not purport to be able to answer them. However, we need to create points of permeability and exchange between spheres of humanistic exploration and creation. The humanities of the streets, for instance, must belong to the people, but it must also be able to find pathways to the organized work of nonprofits, to grant funding, and to the academy.

We began this essay by talking about the crisis in the humanities, and where that does and does not live. We have made the case that the humanities are thriving in some spaces, incorporating diverse people and stories that have long been sought as subjects or recipients but not as creators of knowledge by the academy. And we have shown that from its inception, at least from the perspective of Congress, the NEH was meant to allow broad publics to take part in the nation’s cultural endeavors. It is worth considering another passage from that founding legislation:

Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and the humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.¹⁹

The wisdom of that legislation feels strikingly prescient today. The humanities, or rather, a humanities rooted in the public, a humanities of new expressions of culture and of new understandings derived from shared perspectives, has the potential to create the wisdom and vision alluded to in the NEH’s founding legis-

lation and to address the divisions and disconnectedness so common in contemporary America. In doing so, it will be a humanities not in crisis but in its heyday.

As we contemplate such a new humanities, it is important to define the endeavor expansively, so that our understanding of the humanities does not begin (or end) in a list of academic disciplines. At the NJCH, we say that the humanities involve the examination of history, values, culture, and beliefs, but we would like to find an even clearer common thread that holds our humanistic work together. We think that the way to do this is to talk about the humanities as a means of understanding the experiences and perspectives of others. Whether through history, literature, anthropology, religion, or cultural studies, the humanities teach us about how others see the world. If the humanities are about understanding the perspectives and experiences of others, then the reason to participate in them is built into their very definition, and we can see why, amidst the tumult of recent years, the public humanities are thriving among those who would like to overcome or at least diminish the divides in their communities.

But to see the humanities, including the public humanities, realize their potential, we need to find the bridges between academic institutions, nonprofit humanities organizations, and broader communities. Together, we need a humanities that is rooted in disciplines and methods drawn from the academy but that is also rooted in our communities, that is supported by the academy without being appropriated by it. How do we create such an ecosystem of cocreation, power-sharing, and sharing knowledge without breaking trust between the power structure of the academy, the nonprofit industrial complex, and the multitude of publics? We challenge our colleagues in the academy to engage with local communities in ways that involve the setting aside of their power and privilege (for though they often go unacknowledged, the academy bestows the ultimate privileges of job security and freedom of expression that are unavailable in nearly every other sector of work) and engage with communities on equal footing. We challenge our communities to meet with their academic colleagues without resentment or suspicion of expertise that has too often been used as a distancing mechanism. We challenge ourselves to leave behind the chips that so naturally reside on the shoulders of intermediaries and amphibians, who sit between worlds and properly belong to none. We hope to create opportunities by building new networks that cross the boundaries of institutions like colleges and universities, museums and libraries, and community organizations, because such bridges will be built through individual interactions long before we will see any kind of cultural shifts. But we trust that the payoff for this engagement will include broader, inclusive, and more widely valued histories and literatures and a wiser and more just society. It is a tall challenge, but if we can build this sort of ecosystem, the humanities, even those seen through the prism of academic lines and enrollments, will no longer be in crisis.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Matthew Gibson is Executive Director of Virginia Humanities, where he created and helped endow *Encyclopedia Virginia*, a free and reliable multimedia resource that tells the inclusive story of Virginia for students, teachers, and communities who seek to understand how the past informs the present and the future. He received his PhD in English from the University of Virginia in 2005. His dissertation focused on the production of White vigilante narratives in popular American fiction from the novels of Thomas Dixon to the 2004 creation of the Minuteman Project along the Southwest border of the United States.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Many of the pieces in this volume seek to provide a critique of or more nuanced read of these claims about a crisis. We are very much in dialogue with them. See, for example, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, “Max Weber Invented the Crisis of the Humanities,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/max-weber-invented-the-crisis-of-the-humanities/>; and Merve Emre and Len Gutkin, “The Groves of Academe Are Always on Fire,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-groves-of-academe-are-always-on-fire>. A quick search will reveal many additional examples from *The Chronicle* and *Inside Higher Education*. See also Ben Schmidt, “Mea Culpa: There *Is* a Crisis in the Humanities,” Sapping Attention, July 27, 2018, <http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2018/07/mea-culpa-there-is-crisis-in-humanities.html>; and Benjamin Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/>.
- ² Scott Jaschik, “What You Teach Is What You Earn,” *Inside Higher Education*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/28/study-finds-continued-large-gaps-faculty-salaries-based-discipline>. “The best paying fields for full professors (public and private combined) are legal (\$145,732), business (\$129,904) and engineering (\$129,012). Theology is the only field where the average for full professor is less than \$80,000 (\$79,838). . . . Business is the only field in the study where new assistant professors average a six-figure salary (\$113,924). New assistant professors in key humanities fields earn just over half that total. The average for new assistant professors of English is \$57,592 and for history the figure is \$58,412.”
- ³ Stuart A. Selby, “The Screen and the Humanities in General Education,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 3 (2) (1969): 119–127, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3331530>.
- ⁴ Schmidt, “The Humanities Are in Crisis.”
- ⁵ As we stated above, and as the very thorough blog post, “The ‘Crisis’ in the Humanities” by Wayne Bivens-Tatum helps put into historical context, being in a “state of crisis” is

not a new phenomenon for the humanities. People have been talking about it since at least the 1950s. See Wayne Bivens-Tatum, “The ‘Crisis’ in the Humanities,” *Academic Librarian*, November 5, 2010. Searching for “crisis in the humanities” in Google Books’ Ngram Viewer, for example, shows a spike in the phrase’s usage in the mid-1960s, close to the same time as the passage of the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities Act; Ngram Viewer, Google Books, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>. This spike is due primarily to the publication in 1964 of *Crisis in the Humanities*, a compilation of essays edited by J. H. Plumb, and subsequent and prolific citations of that book until the mid-1970s; J. H. Plumb, *Crisis in the Humanities* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964). The next steady incline of the phrase in journals and monographs follows from the mid-1990s and the “culture war” and assault on arts and culture to the mid-2000s. The steep escalation in which we continue to find ourselves begins with the aftermath of the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009. According to the Ngram Viewer, the trend of the phrase is beginning to plateau, but hardly declining.

⁶ 20 U.S. Code § 952 (a), accessed via the Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/952#a>.

⁷ Eric Hayot, “The Humanities Have a Marketing Problem,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-humanities-have-a-marketing-problem>. Hayot contends that the main problem in the academic humanities is that “The curriculum is stale. . . . The majors are stale.” While his perspective and solutions are still insular to the academy rather than focused more broadly on public engagement and relevance, Hayot suggests that “if we want students to understand the relationship between what we teach and questions of immense contemporary concern, we should put those matters of concern into our curricular structures.” For him, interdisciplinarity and theme-based curricula around topics of relevant concern are critical. He acknowledges that we already have a model for this in more cultural studies–based interdisciplines.

⁸ “Public Humanities,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_humanities (accessed July 2, 2021).

⁹ For a full transcription of the Act, see National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, Public Law 89-209, September 29, 1965, <https://www.neh.gov/about/history/national-foundation-arts-and-humanities-act-1965-pl-89-209>.

¹⁰ For more in-depth histories, see Jamil Zainaldin, “Public Works: NEH, Congress, and the State Humanities Councils,” *The Public Historian* 35 (1) (2013): 28–50; and Mary Rizzo, “Humanities Councils,” *The Inclusive Historian’s Handbook*, May 23, 2019.

¹¹ It is important to note here that the NEH chose a governance and organizational model for humanities councils that diverged from the state agency model that the NEA created for arts commissions. Where state and regional arts commissions are run by the state or jurisdictional government, humanities councils are independent nonprofit entities.

¹² In fact, we can undercut our argument here and say that investments in the arts and humanities reached their peak in 1979 (using 2019 dollars). And given the leaps in funding to other government programs, one can easily make the argument that there has been a seismic divestment in the arts and humanities in government appropriations. On the other hand, given the alternative of four straight years from the Trump White House to zero-out these agencies, we will take the uninflated gains.

- ¹³ Such activities include grant-making to cultural nonprofits, expanding inclusive cultural documentation and preservation projects, outreach to veterans groups with book and writing programs, and colloquia and participatory forums focusing on civics education.
- ¹⁴ Council-created or -supported online regional encyclopedias are published in territories and states including Colorado, Georgia, Guam, Louisiana, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas, West Virginia, and Virginia. Radio programs and podcasts include New York Humanities' *Amended*, which explores suffrage history with host Laura Free, associate professor of history at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Virginia Humanities produces *With Good Reason*, an NPR program featuring professors from Virginia's public universities and colleges discussing their research and its relevance to the public. From 2008 until 2020, Virginia Humanities also produced *BackStory*, a popular public history podcast featuring several history professors discussing the history behind the headlines of today's news.
- ¹⁵ Allison Wrabel, "Yancey Heritage and History Exhibit Tells the Story of Education in Esmont," *The Daily Progress*, February 27, 2021, https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/education/watch-now-yancey-heritage-and-history-exhibit-tells-the-story-of-education-in-esmont/article_49e2ce16-7893-11eb-b383-bb5012fe58c9.html.
- ¹⁶ Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 5.
- ¹⁷ For example, Joe Martucci, "Christopher Columbus Statue to Come Down in Atlantic City," *The Press of Atlantic City*, June 28, 2020, https://pressofatlanticcity.com/news/christopher-columbus-statue-to-come-down-in-atlantic-city/article_2bed34af-4b8a-55b5-b480-63f31e5341d5.html; and Isaac Avilucea, "2 Charged with Defacing George Washington Monument in Trenton," *Trentonian*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.trentonian.com/2020/06/25/2-charged-with-defacing-george-washington-monument-in-trenton/>.
- ¹⁸ Tom Wiedmann and Mark J. Bonamo, "George Floyd Statue at Newark City Hall Defaced One Week after Unveiling," *TAPinto*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.tapinto.net/towns/newark/sections/arts-and-entertainment/articles/george-floyd-statue-at-newark-city-hall-defaced-one-week-after-unveiling>.
- ¹⁹ National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965.