

**Self-Assessment of the
Florida Humanities Council
Conducted for the National Endowment for the Humanities
September 2018**

I. Introduction

On September 26-28, 2018, Deborah Watrous, former executive director of New Hampshire Humanities and current Massachusetts Director of Philanthropy for Food Corps, and Bob Beatty, president of the Lyndhurst Group, visited the Florida Humanities Council (FHC) headquarters in St. Petersburg, Florida, for a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) assessment. Karen Kenton, Director, Office of Federal State Partnership represented NEH.

The FHC team, under the direction of Steve Seibert, executive director, crafted and coordinated a thorough and wide-ranging agenda with a variety of internal and external stakeholders. The visit included in-depth meetings with Seibert, the FHC staff, the executive committee of the FHC board of directors, and four meetings consisting of thirty-two FHC constituents. In addition, the assessment team attended a full FHC board meeting, a dinner with the organization's leadership team and its board chair, and an FHC public program called "Our Water, Our Florida."

Prior to our meetings, Watrous and Beatty met with Seibert to discuss the current vision and priorities for the Council. Seibert noted four key areas of emphasis, which we kept in mind as we reviewed the organization's work:

- Reaching underserved and under-resourced communities
- Maximizing the impact of the Council's grants program
- Development of a new strategic plan
- Diversity and inclusion

We found much to praise about the Florida Humanities Council. Through this robust series of meetings, it is apparent that the organization is striving to meet its proposed mission, "to preserve, promote, and share the history, literature, culture, and personal stories that offer Floridians a better understanding of themselves, their communities, and their state." Thus, it serves Floridians in the fulfillment of the NEH mission to serve and strengthen our nation through the support of "high-quality projects and programs in the humanities and by making the humanities available to all Americans."

In addition, in Seibert, FHC has a dynamic and thoughtful leader, one who understands and embodies the importance of the humanities to Florida and the nation—and who also has tremendous experience in serving the State of Florida in other capacities. The team, led by Patricia Putman, is cohesive and committed. It is a combination of longer-term members who have much institutional knowledge and have adapted to the changing landscape multiple times and younger and/or newer members who embrace new ideas and encourage their colleagues to push boundaries in new and creative ways. This is an exciting combination.

It is particularly important to highlight a significant and groundbreaking change the organization has made in the last two years. Defined in its 2018 Self-Assessment Report as "becoming a 'wholesale rather than retail' provider of humanities programming," the FHC has turned from offering its own programming in venues across the state (a retail model) to instead working with regional and local partners on a more wholesale basis, to allow the partners to offer the humanities programming for their own constituents (who are, it's important to note,

also FHC stakeholders). This transformation is incredibly noteworthy as it best responds to the needs of stakeholders and, more importantly, is a very efficient way for the Council to best utilize its resources in such a large, geographically and culturally diverse state.

We commend the staff for proposing this model (and the board for approving it). As the organization moves forward into a comprehensive strategic planning phase, the plan should help FHC define what success looks like in this new model and collect data to assess progress toward meeting those goals. Our meetings included much discussion about the Council's stellar reputation statewide as a grant-maker and convener, but very little formal data to back up these claims. This is an important next step not only for measuring effectiveness, but also in ongoing advocacy conversations.

In addition, the twin goals of increased diversity and of reaching underserved, underrepresented, and under-resourced communities remain vague at this time, pending more definition in the upcoming strategic planning process. We encourage the Council to think beyond the "diversity" stage—"Everybody's welcome"—to embrace "inclusion," where the Council acts with intentionality to ensure wider representation of racial and ethnic minorities in decision-making, program design, delivery, and evaluation. This will help to ensure that Florida's richly diverse population is represented as co-creators of the Council's future direction. These twin ideas—the review of the wholesale vs. retail model with an eye for diversity, access, and equity—underpin this report.

II. Context in which the Council Works

The FHC's self-assessment report clearly articulated the context within which it works, including the significant challenges of a \$2 million organization serving a state the size and with the diversity of Florida. Truly a daunting task! We were impressed by the staff and board's willingness to take a hard look at all of their programs and grantmaking within this context and with an eye toward concentrating on those offerings and services that deliver the greatest return to the FHC and to the state. It is never easy to let go of a signature program beloved by board, staff, or even a donor. It is a sign of the health of the FHC as an organization that they are willing to do so.

The multiplier effect made possible through the wholesale model has great validity given the Council's resources compared to the vast scale of the state. In addition to direct grants and programs such as the *Speakers Series* and *Florida Stories* walking tours, the FHC also serves—and recognizes that it could do more—as a convener in the state, especially with the deep cuts experienced over the past few years in the state arts budget. Noted by many interviewees, the FHC already enjoys a very positive reputation among grantees, academic and nonprofit leaders, and many local and state governmental officials for high-quality, non-partisan work. Yet according to Seibert, there is little formal communication or collaboration among the leading statewide cultural, historical, and academic entities. Why not step into the vacuum and claim a leadership role that could also raise the FHC's stature (including with state government) and could lead to new programmatic and funding collaborations?

We heard from both staff and board members a deep anxiety over the future of state funding. Fortunately, to-date the FHC has been spared the cuts experienced by the state arts council and library system, a testament to their strong reputation and, perhaps, to the fact that they "fly under the radar," as more than one interviewee noted. They are not sanguine, however, nor should they be. One of FHC's most important constituencies—perhaps the most important in financial terms—is the State of Florida, specifically its state legislature and Governor. Staff and Board recognize the value of *FORUM* magazine, *Museums on Main Street*, the *Florida Stories*

app, and *Poetry Out Loud* to create positive impressions among government officials and their staffs.

When the state humanities councils were first created in the early 1970s, they were intentionally established as independent organizations and not state agencies to ensure that there would be no undue political influence on the councils' programming. Like Florida, many state councils now receive state appropriations. Some interviewees mentioned a worry that money from the State comes at the price of programmatic timidity, that the FHC has shied away from topics and grantees that might be viewed as too controversial. Is the FHC possibly missing out on topics that might be highly relevant and where a humanities perspective on a controversial issue could shed light? We offer these comments not as criticism, but as a suggested subject for discussion as part of the FHC's strategic planning process. And we encourage the FHC to reach out to other state council directors who are successfully navigating this same challenge to learn from their experiences.

Finally, the fragility of public support also points to the need for the Council to develop a few key funding relationships that will broaden its base of support and, ultimately, allow real revenue growth over time. Suggestions will be offered in other sections of this report on ways that the FHC might build on existing programs and partnerships to expand their contributed income.

III. The Council and the Humanities

During our site visit, we had the pleasure of meeting academic colleagues and community partners who confirmed our assessment that the FHC is keeping humanities subjects and methods central to their programming, grant review, and evaluation. Organizers from smaller, rural communities spoke of the credibility that their local museum or historical society gained when an esteemed scholar spoke in their town or the Council provided funding for their work. They noted that these scholars were able to contextualize the local history and culture and bring scholarly rigor to their talks. As one interviewee put it, "This is the college education I never had." Organizational leaders also noted that programs anchored by humanities scholars attract new people to a community and a site they might not have entered before out of fear or ignorance. That can help change people's understanding and perceptions of a community, each other, and ourselves—critical outcomes of engagement with the humanities.

We heard from interviewees about innovative high-quality, high-impact programming made possible by the FHC, from oral histories of recent refugees to summer institutes for high school students, and from being a critical early funder of the University of Florida's Humanities Center to offering scholar-led community conversations about the role of the media in a democracy.

Though there was high praise for speakers in the FHC's *Speakers Series*, we also heard from staff, grantees, and a *Speakers Series* presenter that the roster needs updating. Grantees desire new topics and presenters. Most importantly, the roster needs greater racial and ethnic diversity, something the FHC already knows and on which it is working.

The humanities are deeply woven into the fabric of the organization, and its decisions regarding how it serves its audience reflect an adaptation of the way the Council functions in the current environment. While few scholars were included in the groups we interviewed (outside of staff and board), we believe the importance of the humanities is so ingrained into the organizational culture that it underpins nearly every Council effort—without having to be specifically highlighted. We would be remiss, however, if we did not point out the continued importance of engaging scholars as thought partners, including in the upcoming strategic plan.

IV. Programs and Grants

This is one of the more exciting aspects of the Council that we reviewed. Staff, board, and stakeholders all could articulate clearly (and in their own words) the purpose of the FHC statewide and the best way to utilize the Council's funding. The move from the retail to wholesale model of programming is perhaps the most important part of this equation.

The days are long past for organizations like the FHC to provide its own programming in large scale attempts across Florida. As the Council's self-assessment reported, the state is far too large and too diverse ethnically, racially, economically, and, notably, geographically for this to be an effective model. What citizens in the more rural Florida Panhandle need often differs greatly from what those the urban areas of South Florida desire. (The same is true for the regions between them.) In addition to the inefficiency in programming, it is also presumptuous for the Council to state unequivocally the needs of and wishes for these communities for access to humanities programming.

It was wise for the staff to divide up the state by five geographic regions. In doing so, the FHC can focus its work on closer, longer-term relationships and partnerships in those regions—with partners and stakeholders who best know the local communities served. In addition, the Council can provide the seed funding for new initiatives and even leverage its own resources with local funders—increasing the economic investment in the humanities across the state. We would encourage the Council to continue to think along the wholesale model in this way. It is a wise way to approach and manage its resources.

Stakeholders expressed gratitude that the FHC “brand” brings credibility with the public, public officials, and business leaders in community-wide efforts. One noted that FHC funding is seen as “American as apple pie”—the Council is viewed as nonpartisan, a very important imprimatur that it should further evaluate for marketing and branding purposes.

Overall, the grants program seems to be effective. Staff noted that the Council awards many of its grants to smaller organizations (as opposed to larger universities). Many stakeholders shared success stories with FHC funding such as art therapy for the survivors of the Parkland school mass shooting, *Prime Time* reading initiative, and *Florida Stories* walking tours. Grantees praised the staff, noting that it is generous with assistance and encouragement and works to build the capacity of applicant organizations through the application and reporting processes. A number of interviewees noted that small grant amounts require organizations to do a cost-benefit calculation: Is the money worth the time to apply and manage the grant? Sometimes it’s not. “Too little money for too much work,” noted one. Despite these critiques, many interviewees praised the Council’s reporting requirements as beneficial not only in helping them to assess past work but in being more effective going forward.

The staff and board all highlighted *FORUM* magazine as one of the FHC's keynote programs. It is content-rich and visually appealing and has a statewide distribution. But its impact is little-measured, and it’s worth noting that no single external constituent mentioned *FORUM* unprompted. Given the resources allocated to it, we are left wondering if the organization has truly harnessed the power of the publication for its branding, marketing, and advocacy efforts—in addition to its quality humanities content. Again, this is an area to pursue during the strategic planning process.

V. Partnerships and Collaboration

Despite the relatively small size of the FHC staff within a state as large as Florida, it has developed partnerships with a number of key civic, business, academic, and nonprofit leaders in the state. For example, VisitFlorida.org, the state's tourism website, features the Council's *Florida Stories* walking tours on their website. We applaud Seibert for seeking guidance from and fellowship with leaders from civic, business, academic, and nonprofit sectors, including community foundations, public broadcasting, the statewide library system, and Department of Cultural Affairs.

The FHC may be undervaluing some assets that could raise its visibility and strengthen its revenue. There may be low-cost ways the Council could be effective conveners and advocates that would burnish its reputation and strengthen its position with the State of Florida and with potential private funders. As Helen Levine, Regional Vice Chancellor of the University of South Florida's St. Petersburg campus (the institutional host of the FHC) noted, "We have all of these assets, but we're not talking." The Council could easily fill that void. Other thoughts: Could Seibert speak annually to the statewide leadership training organization and to major business and tourism gatherings?

This is a natural role for the organization as its constituents from across the spectrum see the organization as a connector. As one stakeholder said, "The Florida Humanities Council brings people together." Another reported, "You feel a part of something bigger than what you are individually." In playing a more visible leadership role in its home state, the Council can expand its brand and reach and further elevate the humanities in Florida.

The organization also has the opportunity to better leverage its statewide reach and grant funds to expand its impact. Developing partnerships and collaborations with funders across Florida is an ideal starting point. The FHC has a demonstrated track record of capacity-building among smaller community organizations. Grants from regional community foundations could be sought to cover the cost of FHC grant workshops (including staff and evaluation) or offered as a "challenge" to match FHC grants to local community organizations. Thus, the Council's investment in a region is increased through regional private philanthropy, something the Council may have a hard time doing from St. Petersburg. A key role for board members will be to open doors at some of Florida's community and private foundations. As fundraising is a somewhat new endeavor for the Council, we suggest engaging a fundraising coach for Seibert (and, maybe, the board chair and vice chair) to develop the strategy and skills needed to begin fundraising.

In addition, the Council would be wise to think strategically about implementing regional partnerships. One model is to convene partners in each region of the state, talking about the "new" FHC model, and discussing ways to put it into action through formal relationships, identifying community needs, and discussing how the Council can provide support to meet them—all within the context of the humanities.

We also wonder whether the FHC is getting full value for *Florida Stories*, its walking tours smartphone app. The app itself and the tours currently available are rich and varied, easy to access, and well-designed. And they are beloved by the local organizational partners who helped to create them and promoted them locally when they were first launched. But then what? We saw little evidence of ongoing marketing, either locally or at the state level, once each tour was launched. Perhaps the FHC could engage a college marketing class to analyze this promising program and develop marketing and funding plans to increase visibility and usage. With good

data and a solid plan, the FHC might be able to entice a major business to underwrite *Florida Stories* at a level that would enable the kind of marketing and program development that it deserves.

VI. Organizational Effectiveness and Management

By all accounts, the Florida Humanities Council is a well-managed, efficiently run nonprofit. The thoroughness of the Self-Assessment Report reflected this; our site visit confirmed it.

Seibert leads a stellar, dedicated staff and its board of directors seems appropriately engaged in its work. The movement from a retail to wholesale provider of humanities content reflects not only the staff and board's understanding of its environment but also an adaptation to these factors. The organization is clearly striving to be a more adaptive and community responsive organization. We observed much internal and external momentum for the FHC and its work and focus. We encourage the team to utilize the strategic planning process to harness this enthusiasm in a systematic and meaningful way.

The staff is relatively lean in numbers, which reflects to us the wisdom of the decision to utilize its resources more efficiently. The team in place is a mix of long-time FHC employees and newer staff members. Seibert oversees the entire operation and has three direct reports: Brenda O'Hara (Fiscal Officer), Barbara Bahr (Director of Operations), and Patricia Putman (Associate Director). Putman, who has been with the organization since 2001, leads a team of three program staff. There is a good mix of business-minded professionals, many formally trained in the humanities, supplemented by a team of outside contractors that includes the *FORUM* editor, a communications consultant, and a lobbyist.

We applaud Seibert for working to increase the board's ownership of its meetings and governance duties by assigning committee reporting to the committee chairs. In addition, the staff now evaluates all grant proposals and presents a slate of recommendations to the grants committee of the board for a vote, though any grant application may be accessed directly by individual committee members and pulled from the slate for discussion. As a result, most staff members no longer attend board meetings, a cost and time savings as well as an effective way to engage board members more directly. One downside shared is a potential loss in board/staff relationships and that board members may feel less connected to the organization and to its work. We encourage Seibert to include discussion of board/staff communications and board expectations in the strategic planning process.

Cultivating relationships with state legislators remains an ongoing priority. While the organization's track record for securing State funding is stellar, public funding is always precarious. For this reason, the FHC should encourage board members to stay in contact with state legislators (who are providing \$500,000 funding annually) about activities in their region—particularly how the organization is maximizing its state funding locally. Ideally, board members should be inviting and accompanying state legislators to programs in their communities and ensuring that photos are taken, shared with the legislators' offices, and posted on social media. It also means encouraging partners, grantees, and even attendees to formally express their thoughts on the Council and its work to policymakers, including, though not limited to, local politicians and state legislators.

The board comprises a mix of humanities scholars and professionals and business leaders from across Florida; six are appointed by the governor. Based on our meetings with the board and its Executive Committee, the board seems to be doing its job of ensuring the organization is headed

in the right direction and is utilizing its resources efficiently. While individual board members have projects and initiatives that they prefer, none seems to take precedence over an overarching vision for the organization. Most importantly, the board has recognized and supported the staff's proposal to alter its operations and focus outward—toward offering support to partners to create and deliver humanities programming and activities in their own communities.

VII. Conclusion

The Florida Humanities Council is at an important juncture in its institutional life. It has a dynamic new director, an invigorated staff, an engaged board of directors, passionate stakeholders, and a new organizational focus. Combined, these factors make for an exciting future for the Council and for the humanities in Florida. The FHC team has determined that the traditional top-down model of delivering content is less effective than a more collaborative approach across the state and is implementing processes to put this into action. This is commendable.

The organization's strategic planning process and resulting plan is an important part of this next phase. This includes articulating success measures and an evaluation plan; defining the underserved and under-resourced communities it seeks to serve; incorporating diversity, equity, access, and inclusion into all aspects of its work; pursuing opportunities to advocate for the value of the humanities and of the FHC to the state and its people; and enlarging and diversifying its sources of revenue.

Simply put, the Florida Humanities Council brings people together under the humanities banner. That it is seen as such by the stakeholders we encountered is perhaps its greatest quality, and efforts going forward should not only acknowledge this fact, but also build upon it. This is a delicate balance, we know. Giving up some measure of control while implementing a wholesale instead of retail programming model may mean the loss of some visibility. The Council should keep a focus on building its overarching brand as a humanities convener and facilitator and work strategically with partners to ensure FHC's brand and messaging is consistent and high-profile at events and across all communications platforms developed through the partnerships.

We are grateful for the generosity of all those we interviewed. To a person, they brought thoughtfulness, openness, and the best interests of the Council to our conversations. We thank the staff and Steve Seibert for their excellent work on both their Self-Assessment report and Site Visit planning. We hope that our report offers helpful feedback and a few useful ideas. And we look forward to observing the FHC as it builds on past successes and evolves to meet new challenges and opportunities in the years to come.