

# **Arizona Humanities Council Site Visit Report and Recommendations January 18-19, 2012**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) conducts a state council site visit every five years. The site visits, which typically include two outside evaluators and a staff member from the NEH, are designed to review the staffing, programs and governance of the 56 state, District of Columbia, territory and commonwealth councils with an eye toward improvement of services to state council audiences.

The site visits are broadly informed by detailed self-assessment reports that are prepared by Councils in a format specified by the NEH.

Lisbeth Cort of Whidbey Island, Washington and Marc C. Johnson of Boise, Idaho formed the site review team for the Arizona Humanities Council (AHC). Ms. Cort and Mr. Johnson visited the AHC in Phoenix on January 18-19, 2012.

### **The Site Team**

Ms. Cort is the owner of Cort Communications, a consulting firm that provides board development, communications, fundraising and planning services to nonprofit organizations. She has a background in historic preservation, the arts, philanthropy and land conservation, including service as the Executive Director of the Utah Heritage Foundation and the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation. Ms. Cort also served as Assistant Western Regional Director, National Trust for Historic Preservation. She has a Master of Science degree from Ball State University and a Bachelor of Arts from Tennessee Technological University.

Mr. Johnson is a managing partner with Gallatin Public Affairs, a public affairs and issues management firm with offices in the Pacific Northwest. He is a current board member and former chair of the Idaho Humanities Council and has also served on the board and as chair of the Federation of State Humanities Councils. (AHC is a member of the Federation.) Mr. Johnson served as press secretary and chief of staff to four-term Idaho Governor Cecil D. Andrus and he has worked as a broadcast journalist.

The site team was assisted by Edythe Manza, the director of the Federal-State Partnership program at NEH. As the NEH has noted, the "Federal-State Partnership is a collaborative endeavor of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the fifty-six state humanities councils to ensure that all of the nation's citizens -- wherever they live -- will benefit from substantive humanities programs that are locally designed with the concerns and needs of each state's citizens in mind."

During the Arizona site visit, the team met with AHC Executive Director Brenda Thomson, members of the staff, members of the Executive Committee, and most members of the board of the Council. We

also met with representatives of numerous cultural organizations who have or regularly partner with the Council, a group of grantees who have received financial assistance from AHC, scholars, and speaker's bureau members.

We begin our report with several acknowledgements:

- We were struck by the genuine regard with which the Arizona Council is held by its friends, collaborators and grant recipients. Without exception we found the Council to have a developed a stellar reputation for its willingness to create partnerships and for its ability to maintain quality and compelling programs in a time of difficult financial circumstances in Arizona.
- The team appreciated the completeness and quality of the Council's self evaluation. The report is a fair and accurate assessment of the Council's current state.
- And we offer praise for the obvious difficult and demanding internal work the Council board and staff have done in the past two years to bring stability to the executive leadership and staff, build the membership of the board in a highly strategic way and to enhance financial reporting and oversight.

### **The Focus of Our Report**

Our report will focus on four issues that based upon our conversations and observations we believe should be considered by the board and staff as both current priorities and on-going strategic issues that will require continuing planning and evaluation over the next several years.

The issues are:

- the historic building that houses the Council's offices,
- the organization's development plans, including realistic steps for implementation and addressing organizational capabilities (including what we perceive to be significant technology needs),
- the Council's communications and overall visibility in Arizona, and
- continuing board development, including the alignment of board and staff roles and responsibilities.

## **Observations and Recommendations**

### **The Council's Physical Location – the Ellis-Shackelford House**

The Council recently formalized a lease with the City of Phoenix for its continuing occupation of the nearly 100 year old Ellis-Shackelford House. The house is historically and architecturally significant – it was placed on the National Register in 1983 – and the city has now budgeted several hundred thousand dollars to facilitate badly-needed structural and mechanical renovations of the property. The renovation is scheduled to begin soon.

As currently configured, the house presents numerous challenges in order to serve as a well-functioning office and home for the Council. Most apparently, electrical, heating and air conditioning systems are

inadequate; bathrooms are in need of repair and significant modernization; there are numerous areas of the house that are not currently useable for office, meeting or storage space; and with the Council's offices on the building's second floor there are some very real challenges with security and reception. It is the expectation of the Council board and staff that many of these issues will be addressed in the near term as a result of the renovation.

Clearly the historic building presents genuine opportunities, not the least being its location near the Phoenix Library and other downtown cultural institutions, its location on the city's light rail line and its vicinity to the city's Margaret T. Hance Park. The long-term vision for the park and the greater Roosevelt neighborhood is particularly exciting, since it holds the potential to become a genuine cultural destination for residents and visitors. Additionally, the fact that the Council's offices occupy an important and distinctive historic structure cannot help but further the position of the Council as an important institution that celebrates Arizona history and culture.

Still, we believe the house as a home for the Council also presents several major challenges that must be addressed in if the building is to be a useful, usable and long-term home for the Council.

As we understand it, the Council will have ongoing responsibilities as an occupant for managing the usage of the building for other purposes and groups. While this presents obvious opportunities to develop additional partnerships and enhance the visibility and awareness of the Council, these responsibilities are clearly not core to the Council's mission. They easily could, lacking careful planning and resource allocation, become a major time distraction for staff, taking staff time away from programming and forcing time and attention on managing and operating a city property. Likewise, with increased emphasis on the property as the Council's home, we heard some expression of concern that the Council may be viewed as too "Phoenix-centric" for an organization that serves a diverse and statewide audience.

In short, the Ellis-Shackelford House and its opportunities and challenges, in our view, necessitates the immediate development of a realistic and detailed plan that soberly addresses the issues we have identified and others that will undoubtedly arise. Additionally, we are lead to believe that with a new city administration now in place there may be an opportunity to revisit certain terms in the lease which appear heavily weighted in favor of the landlord, including the Council's responsibility to raise funds for acquisition of period furnishings. The Council's landlord may also be open to creative discussions that help define ways the "public considerations" that the Council provides to the city and its residents are calculated.

We are further impressed by the influential community leadership that has coalesced in the Roosevelt neighborhood among new investors and residents. It has, if carefully nurtured, the potential to be of great help to the AHC in terms of fundraising, political clout, and programming partnerships. The neighborhood needs AHC and the Council can benefit from its unique historical and cultural location in Phoenix.

### **Development Plans and Capabilities**

We enthusiastically applaud the very ambitious development plan the Council has adopted. It should be all-too-obvious that for the foreseeable future federal support for state humanities councils is very likely to be flat, at best. Therefore, every state council would be well advised to adopt an aggressive

development program that allows for a diversification of financial support. It is, however, also essential that AHC's development plan be realistic, focused and sustainable.

We respectfully suggest the board and staff focus on these strategic considerations:

- Focus development efforts and resist the very human temptation to try to accomplish many things all at the same time. We recommend articulating phases in the current development plan and adopting a discreet set of specific development goals that can be accomplished on a year-by-year basis rather than broad goals that span several years. We suggest being very clear about revenue expectations and staff and board expectations, roles and responsibilities specific to each goal and major development activity. Accountability for meeting specific milestones is essential to insure implementation.
- We heard some significant frustration and very real urgency expressed by Council staff about the organization's lack of adequate technology that allows them to carry out their jobs effectively and efficiently. Technology upgrades are required if the Council is to meet its ambitious goals. It is beyond the scope of this report and our review to suggest specific technology enhancements, but the Council may be well advised to put high priority on conducting an assessment of its technology needs and acting swiftly to make necessary improvements. At a minimum, upgrades to databases that the Council utilizes for development and grant management, would seem to be a necessity in order to reduce duplicative manual entry and to newly cross-reference information for fundraising purposes. Once this assessment is completed, the Board can consider a plan, based on resources and other factors, to begin to address technology issues that, we emphasize, seem to require priority treatment.

We are impressed and gratified that the AHC Board appreciates the fact that it must be fully engaged in development efforts. The Board commitment to a 100% level of giving is a strong and necessary sign of engagement. Some additional thoughts for your consideration:

- Consider making development implementation a key part of every Board meeting. This approach could be valuable to the Board and staff in order to regularly assess whether specific development targets are being met, for example, and help insure accountability.
- Board discussion, with staff, about specific time commitments and responsibilities regarding development activities may be helpful to establishing or clarifying expectations all around.
- For the near term, like most state council's, the Arizona Council will depend upon the federal appropriation through the NEH as the principle source of its operating budget. At the same time, we did not detect a detailed plan to broaden and deepen the Council's relationships and relevance with individual members of the Arizona Congressional delegation. We believe this is a critical Board function and demands intense and on-going effort. Bluntly put, Congress controls the purse strings for most of the money state councils utilize. Having relationships and awareness and being able to show real value to members of Congress is essential in helping preserve, and we would hope, one day increase federal financial support for the state humanities councils.

- We were moved by the stories we heard about the very real impact AHC's grants and programs are having in peoples lives statewide. Rather than relying on statistics and facts in Council communications and development materials, we suggest that the Council consider ways to better incorporate stories and images to make a strong personal connection inspiring potential donors to give.

Finally, we think it is worth further discussion about whether the Council currently has the capability to at the same time to significantly increase annual individual fundraising revenues and undertake an endowment campaign. While the Council's upcoming anniversary presents a wonderful opportunity to focus on fundraising, careful thought should be given to whether the Council has the time and capacity to launch an endowment campaign at this time.

### **Council Visibility and Communications**

The Arizona Council struggles with a fundamental challenge that every state council faces – visibility and public awareness. Unlike state arts councils whose very name helps define their purpose, humanities councils offer a confusing or misunderstood “brand” to the general public. The humanities are not easily or uniformly defined. All councils have stories about being confused with the local humane society or some other group or organization.

We would respectfully suggest that consideration be given to developing a formal communication plan, beginning with specific communication goals, followed by an assessment of all current and potential communication activities and AHC resources and capabilities to meet the goals. Such a plan could outline ways that various tactics – earned and paid media, social media, the Council's website, etc. – could help the Council meet its specific communications goals. For instance, using this approach social media is used as just one tool supporting an over communications strategy vs. an end in itself.

Brand enhancement and increased awareness will result from the Council's communication activities becoming intentional – much as grant reviews or development activities are intentional – as well as strategic, planned activities.

The Council's primary platform for brand awareness and communication is its website. With much of the Council's web servicing provided by an outside contractor, who is primarily a technician and not a content creator, we believe the Council could now consider doing what is necessary to bring web management in house. Closer coordination could be a means to maximize integration of the website with all other Council activities, to expedite timely website updates, increase staff efficiency, and to develop a culture of constant improvement and innovation in the delivery of on-line humanities content and information.

The Council is also in a position to help raise the visibility of grantees and partners. We were pleased to learn of the ability of the Council to play an important role in Arizona as a convener of grantees, partners, etc. to connect like-minded people. We believe this role might be enhanced and made more central to the Council's visibility efforts. For example, during one of our sessions it quickly became obvious that individuals and organizations that the Council has long-established relationships with did not also know each other well or at all. The common link in these groupings is AHC and that is a great foundation around which to grow the Council's value as a connector and conveyer.

## **Board Development**

There may be no more important role for the Board of a non-profit organization than that of continually re-inventing, enhancing and energizing itself. In fact, there are few duties of a Board member more important than identifying and nurturing future Board members.

Clearly the Council's Board has been paying a great deal of attention to these responsibilities and the quality and engagement of Board members is very impressive. We note particularly the excellent system that has been established to strategically identify skills, connections, geographic diversity, or other qualities needed by the organization and then to recruit potential Board members to fill those needs. We congratulate the Board on this effort and heartily endorse continued attention to this priority.

A continuing challenge will no doubt be to further diversify the board with potentially more corporate, business and non-academic members who can bring to the governance and strategic direction of the Council additional experience, contacts and skills. We acknowledge that diversifying the Board is both a noble and necessary goal for most every non-profit, but that doing so can be particularly tricky with a state humanities council board. The mission of the Council is, after all, enhanced by the strong and committed service of academics. The trick is to diversify membership and broaden available skills without diminishing the central value of an academic and scholarly orientation to the humanities.

We think the Council Board is clearly on the right track with its effort and encourage continued commitment to ongoing board cultivation, recruitment and training.

## **Alignment of Board/Staff Roles, Responsibilities and Priorities**

We observed a very collegial and committed board and staff of the Arizona Humanities Council. We also appreciate and believe there to be a very healthy sense of openness and candor about what is acknowledged to be the fairly substantial staff turnover in the recent past. The unsettled sense that often naturally accompanies such turnover seems to have dissipated. At the same time, we encourage continued attention to a three specific areas impacting Council staff effectiveness and morale: budget development, technology planning and implementation, and alignment of Board and staff roles and responsibilities.

The budgeting process of state councils is exacerbated by the now almost standard failure by the Congress to approve, on any regular or predictable schedule, appropriation levels for the National Endowment for the Humanities. This unpredictable appropriations process means great uncertainty for state councils and creates a situation where a Council's budget that is in an almost continual state of flux. This naturally places considerable stress on staff and without a sure sense of the Board's budget priorities can lead to frustration and a lack of clarity about the appropriate financial parameters on which to operate on a day-to-day basis.

We respectfully recommend that the Board, to the extent possible, seek to provide clarity and direction to the staff about priorities and funds available to carry out programs and projects. This will be a challenge since it will require both short- and long-term thinking and strategy. We observe that over the long-term, planning and budget uncertainties represent significant and worrying issues for the staff.

We developed a sense during our visit that the technology and work place challenges that were discussed earlier in this report have also created some lack of clarity for staff. Technology upgrades and

a truly functional office work place are urgent and clear priorities for the staff, but there is a sense that these priorities are not always completely aligned with the Board's priorities. These seem to be challenges of clarification and refining expectations rather than any serious issue, but we would recommend that the Board regularly assess how its priorities and expectations – in these and other areas – align with those of its dedicated staff.

## **Conclusion**

The Arizona Humanities Council appears to have stabilized its Board and staff after a period of some uncertainty, including six executive directors and heavy staff turnover in the last nine years. The Board has developed, and is systematically carrying out, solid plans in the areas of financial management, fundraising, and board development.

The Council has a sterling reputation among its regular partners and collaborators. Clearly the Council's programming, and that of its grantees is addressing important social and public issues in the state, providing a rare forum for discussing highly-charged issues and thus increasing understanding and civility. The Council is a respected, relevant, and essential cultural leader in Arizona.

In each case, these are facts and circumstances to celebrate and we congratulate the Board and staff for these obvious and important accomplishments.

Future and enhanced funding for state councils remains a critical issue and we strongly recommend aggressive and sustained attention to diversifying and strengthening the Council's financial foundation. Growth of financial support is, in many ways, dependent upon more people knowing and appreciating the Council's good work. We hope our recommendations with regard to visibility and communications are helpful in this regard.

The Arizona Council is blessed with a talented and dedicated staff and a Board that seems fully capable of growing the Council's resources and relationships in order to bring more of its programs and initiatives to the people of Arizona.

We sincerely appreciate the invitation to learn about the Council's work and provide what we hope will be constructive observations and recommendations, which can help the Council to grow and get even better at the essential job of bringing quality humanities programs to the citizens of Arizona.

Respectfully submitted and thank you.

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