

Taking Stock, Telling our Story, Transforming the Future

The members of the planning committee for the 2012 National Humanities Conference invite you to use this occasion, four decades into our experience of engaging the public with the humanities, to step back and take stock of our best practices, our most effective program formats and subjects, and our most compelling messages. These perspectives will help us respond to our very challenging present and plan for an unpredictable future. We also encourage outside perspectives on the work we do and its impact.

40 years as catalysts for change

Through the work of the state humanities councils, Americans have engaged in countless acts of learning that place the humanities at the core of meaningful community experiences. For 40 years, councils have identified and responded to the needs of our communities for civic engagement and cultural enrichment. In the process, councils have also learned how to be nimble, collaborative, and reliable partners and advocates.

Today, national discourse and politics are seriously divided over *what we owe each other* and *who pays*, over what constitutes the common good and what role citizens, businesses, and government should play in this endeavor. Recognizing and addressing our unique strengths and weaknesses may be the best strategy to lead the way through a new political, economic, and social landscape.

Going forward: How do we see ourselves? How do others see us?

In our conference sessions—both plenary and targeted—the planning committee invites members to focus on what councils have tried, what has worked, and what councils have learned from experiments both in our programming and in sustaining ourselves as viable nonprofit organizations. We encourage you to think about how we can incorporate candid perspectives in our sessions from those outside our immediate community. We invite you to think about how we view ourselves and how we relay that view to others. The following paragraphs suggest just a few of the areas we might consider as we draw on our history to map our path forward.

Celebrating our history How can we honor the lessons we have learned and the legacy we have created in these first four decades? What impact do we hope to achieve in the next 40 years? How do we effectively address our most enduring criticisms?

The new common good In fractious times like these, councils are called upon to play a greater role than ever in bringing people together across divides, creating safe spaces for difficult discussions, and strengthening communities. We now have a body of experience that shows us the formats, themes, and media that support this kind of work, as well as the experiments that failed or have outlived their time. What does this tell us about where we go next in the critical task of bringing people together for respectful, productive dialogue?

Getting the word out Councils have struggled throughout our history with the need to convey clearly who we are and what we do. As competition for funding intensifies, we

must find more effective ways of telling our story as individual state councils and collectively as the Federation of State Humanities Councils. In this pursuit, it will be useful to ask how others see us and what we can learn from organizations and individuals who experience our work from the outside. How can we more effectively tell our stories, as one and as many?

Partnerships and collaborations Councils are known as good partners, and over the years we have become more and more expert at extending resources through partnerships and collaborations. But what have we learned about what it means to partner with others? How is that different from collaboration? What are our criteria for engagement, and what are our aims?

The quest for stable funding The need for public and private funding sources remains certain. Both sources help councils deepen public interaction with the humanities and strengthen our case for support. New funding sources often generate new ideas, and new ideas often generate new avenues for funding. How does our need for both public and private funds affect our programming, messaging, staffing, and board recruitment?

Political realities of 2012 and beyond When we gather for our 2012 conference we will have just emerged from a national election and entered a new political landscape. Remaining relevant is critical. Are there new ideas and tools on the horizon that will help councils thrive? What has our 40-year history told us about what we can do to adapt to change? How will we respond to the public's need for addressing the issues that confront their communities and nation?