

Topic: National Message

Background

The first element of the Federation's plan calls for the Federation to develop and disseminate a national message about the importance of council work to the civic health of our communities and nation. Last year, the materials we prepared for Congress and others carried a message focused on several ways in which the state humanities councils employ federal dollars to serve their communities. This message, distilled from information we gathered through surveys of councils and review of council materials, included the following:

- 1) Councils reach communities in remote as well as densely populated areas.
- 2) Councils preserve and strengthen local institutions.
- 3) Councils support K-12 education.
- 4) Councils help build understanding of community history and identity.

In addition, the position paper the Federation prepared for distribution to congressional offices during Humanities on the Hill cited statistics about dollars leveraged, numbers of communities reached, and partners enlisted to stretch available resources.

Questions

- 1) Which messages in this year's materials did you use to try to persuade your members of Congress of the value of council work?
- 2) Which of these messages were effective? Ineffective? Why?
- 3) Should any of these messages be modified? If so, how?
- 3) Should the Federation try to reach audiences besides those we are already targeting? If so, which ones? How should we try to reach them?

Materials attached and available at the Forum

- 1) Federation 2011 position paper
- 2) Talking points
- 3) Edited text of letter presented to subcommittees

Topic: Our Partnership with NEH

Background

The Federation plan notes that both the councils and the NEH “must see our relationship as a true partnership, based on mutual interdependence and common cause.” The elements of the plan within this section call for the Federation to 1) use our information gathering to strengthen NEH’s analysis and reporting of council work; 2) make a case for increasing resources for NEH in the federal budget; 3) serve as the voice of the councils in helping to shape NEH plans and decisions when such plans will affect councils; and 4) seek an expanding role for councils in carrying out the NEH mandate.

As the councils and the NEH face an increasingly challenging federal funding picture, this partnership becomes more and more important. The agency can carry out a truly national mandate only by maintaining a healthy network of organizations, represented by the state humanities councils, which reach small and large communities all across the country. For their part, the councils will thrive only if they enjoy the support of a strong national agency.

Questions

- 1) What defines the partnership between the NEH and the councils? What should define it?
- 2) How is the nature of this partnership affected by changing economic and political forces?
- 3) What role is the Federation best positioned to play in strengthening and defining the partnership?

Topic: Communications Tools

Background

A key theme of the Federation's five-year plan is the importance of information exchange among councils. The Federation seeks to provide as many vehicles and forums as possible for councils to learn from each other, share ideas and strategies, and shape a common message out of the diversity of state circumstances and programs. Goal 11 of the plan specifically directs us to "help each other to be better stewards of the public resources that have been placed in our trust by sharing ideas and examples of good practice."

Over the past year we have increased our information exchange possibilities in several ways, launching Google Groups to facilitate online conversation, convening a retreat for executive directors, conducting an orientation for new directors, facilitating arrangements for program officers to hold a meeting in conjunction with the conference, and launching a Facebook page. In the coming year we will undertake a redesign of the Federation website. The Federation has also launched Google Docs as a repository of documents related to council work. Council executive directors and a few staff now have access to Google Docs; the Federation will make access available to additional council staff over the next few months.

Questions

- 1) Which of the communication tools provided by the Federation offer the most effective means of exchanging ideas and information?
- 2) What additional tools would it be useful to provide? What tools does your council use that you have found to be particularly effective?
- 3) What elements can we include in the new Federation website that will be most useful to councils and will most effectively tell the story of council work to the broader public?

Topic: The New World of Advocacy

Background

Over the past several years the Federation and the state humanities councils have dramatically increased our collective skill and effectiveness in carrying out online grassroots campaigns to make our case with members of Congress. Over the past several months, it has become clear that in this year, at least, such campaigns were not the most effective approach for ensuring that our message was being heard by the right people. Instead, we relied heavily on the good communication of councils with members in key positions in the leadership and on subcommittees to convey that message. With the congressional debates focusing on such overriding issues as the deficit and the total federal budget, we needed to target our efforts through individual contacts.

The lesson we learned was not that well-coordinated grassroots campaigns were a thing of the past but rather that the Federation must be nimble in assessing the political climate and the best means of influencing the funding decisions. It is still important for councils to stay in regular contact with their entire congressional delegations to maintain a consistent level of understanding of humanities programs on the part of all members of Congress. But the mechanisms through which councils communicate with members may vary.

Questions

- 1) What have you found to be the most effective means of communicating with your members of Congress? What approaches are most successful in capturing their attention?
- 2) What support do you need from the Federation to make the case for the councils to your members?
- 3) What information generated by the Federation is most useful to you in your advocacy efforts?
 - a) Advocacy Handbook
 - b) Position paper
 - c) Talking points
 - d) Other

Materials attached and available at the Forum

- 1) Federation 2011 position paper
- 2) Talking points
- 3) Edited text of letter presented to subcommittees

Topic: Open Space

Background

The Federation board and staff have developed a variety of mechanisms for listening to and learning from the councils, we are eager to know what additional concerns councils have and what the Federation can do to address those concerns.

Questions

- 1) What issues, beyond those noted in other Federation Forum topics, should the Federation board and staff be thinking about in planning for the coming year?