



State Humanities Councils Get People Talking

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Are you concerned about the state of public discourse in America?

You should talk to someone about that.

Last summer, on a windy day in Fort Smith, Arkansas, people got together to talk about the relationship between law enforcement and residents in the city. At the Promise Land Heritage Association in Charlotte, Tennessee, locals had a meal and then spoke about the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision and the current face of American citizenship. And in Holly Springs, Mississippi, a popular tour and discussion series on the architecture of slavery led visitors to form their own interracial discussion group to confront racial barriers through fellowship and civil dialogue.



**Vibrant public discourse
is essential to a healthy democracy**

Civil public discussion is vital to a flourishing democracy and a crucial part of the social fabric for communities of all sizes. But creating that discourse can be a challenge and many communities are eager for help. The state humanities councils have responded to this need by organizing hundreds of gatherings like those above in church basements, community rec rooms, and classrooms across the country.

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CASE IN POINT

Arizona's "FRANK Talks" program gathers people for face-to-face conversations on issues of local and national importance, like school choice policies in Arizona or the relationship between GMO foods and global hunger—all issues meant to inspire people to practice and improve the skills of citizenship.



NEW JERSEY COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES
One Book, One Cherry Hill discussion with Jamie Ford
David Michael Howarth Photography



MINNESOTA HUMANITIES CENTER
"Blues Vision" for Educators
Anna Min

These discussions build social bonds and cultivate local identity, they introduce people to members of their own community, and they prompt friends and strangers to talk about challenging issues that often go unaddressed. Facilitators from state humanities councils help shape the discussion and make sure a lively debate doesn't turn into a shouting match.

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The state humanities councils help ensure conversations will continue by training facilitators and staff at hosting institutions, and by constantly creating new and pertinent discussion topics. These conversations come in all shapes and sizes; some are organized around a common theme and spread across a state, like the “Legacy of Race and Ethnicity in Ohio” series that asks communities to explore where they've been, where they are, and where they want to be. Others respond to specific moments of trauma, like Maryland Humanities' “Baltimore Stories” that brought residents of that city together to talk about the events surrounding Freddie Gray's death.



State Humanities Councils support communities' diverse interests

Communities can also choose what they want to talk about—a small town in North Dakota might want to discuss attitudes toward public land management, while residents of Eugene, Oregon might want to talk about the intersection of faith and politics—and state humanities councils support that diversity of interests by offering a range of subjects tailored to their constituents.

Talking about your town's attitude toward aging or the role of money in education might not be an easy conversation, and some of the most important questions we can ask do not always have clear answers, but the very act of asking and discussing those questions can be an incredibly powerful tool for understanding shared values, priorities, and identities. Conversations connect people and ideas, and they tighten the bonds of a community. They give people a chance to listen to someone different from themselves, and they elevate the discussion for all involved. If you're concerned about the state of public discourse in this country, then you should attend a conversation hosted by your state humanities council. You might just change your mind.

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