

20
24

{ Summary REPORT }

PA HUMANITIES

discovery project

*Andrew Zitcer
Julie Goodman
Laurie Zierer
Dawn Frisby Byers
AND Jared Valdez*

REFRAMING A MOVEMENT

A project of PA Humanities and Drexel University's Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts & Design





Photo courtesy of Marywood University

High school students from Wallenpaupack make zines at Marywood University's printmaking studio.



This work is core to who I am as a human being – I have always sought to build bridges between people and honor the diversity of human experience. ... I can't not do it. It is a primal drive for me."

-SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Our commitment to the humanities for the last 50 years has been driven by a belief in the transformative *power of people* to lead and make positive change. As we now face so many challenges in our own lives and communities, my faith and hope is stronger than ever in the people of Pennsylvania – in their passion for the humanities, our humanity, and in their commitment to give back. All across the state I see people using the humanities to power their communities, transform their world, and affirm their purpose in life.

Throughout the process of the PA Humanities Discovery Project, people shared with us how the humanities are core to their experience as human beings and essential to a thriving community. Their perspectives strongly affirm that the humanities are a fundamental human right. I invite you to discover our learnings in this summary report and join our conversation as we explore, map, and reimagine the humanities landscape.

Here you can dive into our approach to the research, learn about the people and their work with the humanities – how they discovered in the last few years that the humanities are more important than ever for human flourishing, and why they see an urgent need to redefine the field and our value to make meaning in our lives and ensure a future where everyone in our communities can thrive.

My deepest gratitude to everyone involved in this project – from the people who took our surveys and joined our focus groups and listening sessions, to the many advisors that gave their time to stretch our thinking, to the team at Drexel University and PA Humanities who collaborated and spent long hours discovering together our purpose and journey with this project. My thanks also goes to our donors and funders at the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, and their belief in the importance of supporting research on recovery and growth and amplifying voices from the field.

I hope you are as encouraged as I am by this unprecedented look at Pennsylvania's humanities practitioners. Together we can make lasting change.

With hope and gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurie Zierer".

Laurie Zierer

Executive Director, PA Humanities

{ Access the full report at [DiscoveryProject.com](https://discoveryproject.com), along with an interactive website. }



Rock to the Future students performing original music at the Year End Showcase at One Art Community Center in Philadelphia.

{ Table of CONTENTS }

Introduction	04
I. About the PA Humanities Discovery Project	05
Research team	
Participatory emergent strategy	
Guided by values	
Inspirations	
II. Research Methodology	09
III. Where Are We? The State of Humanities in PA	13
Who are PA's humanities practitioners?	
What humanities activity is happening in PA?	
Themes of humanities activity in PA	
IV. How Do We Connect and Grow? A Diversifying Landscape	19
Impacts of 2020-2024	
The experiences of BIPOC humanities practitioners	
Identifying the next generation of humanities support and leadership	
V. Why is Humanities Work Important?	25
How practitioners describe their work	
Top themes from the participants	
What motivates practitioners to do this work?	
Humanities work is vital, but is there a marketing problem?	
Human flourishing & happiness: A capabilities approach	
VI. Reframing the Humanities in Pennsylvania	33
Call to action	
Join the movement	
Acknowledgments	38



No person’s story should go undeveloped and untold. Every life matters. I’ve seen how story sharing can connect people from seemingly different backgrounds around their unique and shared experiences.”

-SURVEY PARTICIPANT

In 2021 PA Humanities engaged Drexel University to co-develop an innovative research effort to uncover and describe the scope of humanities practice in Pennsylvania. Inspired by research from other humanities councils and national studies examining the state of humanities, PA Humanities sought to position its work to address a unique gap in the existing research. Where other studies have focused on humanities organizations or the general public, PA Humanities aimed to lift up the lived experiences and perspectives of humanities practitioners. Framing the research through this lens enabled us to co-create an emergent design methodology responsive to ongoing input and feedback from the practitioners themselves.

The Discovery Project uncovers the assets of the humanities, as well as opportunities for new ways of thinking, doing, and supporting them. The research uplifts the voices of humanities practitioners, especially BIPOC voices, and recognizes the value of applied humanities to the field. The project also embraces a community-driven, emergent research design.

We want to be in the business of “possibility modeling,” as a participant called it. We look forward to continuing opportunities to lift up practitioner voices and to co-design a thriving future for the humanities in Pennsylvania. Practitioner voices matter because they point to new and different models to contribute to the field as professionals. This research will empower and encourage new and renewed conversations among funders, policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders as the results of the PA Humanities Discovery Project begin to shape the statewide and national discourse on humanities.

We hope you find this research as empowering as we do.

Handwritten signatures of Julie Goodman and Andrew Zitcer in black ink.

Julie Goodman & Andrew Zitcer
*Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts & Design
Drexel University*

ABOUT THE PA HUMANITIES

discovery project

“Focus on critical connections more than critical mass – build the resilience by building the relationships.”

-adrienne marie brown

KAZKA Ukrainian Folk Ensemble in Schuylkill County at the Ukrainian Homestead.

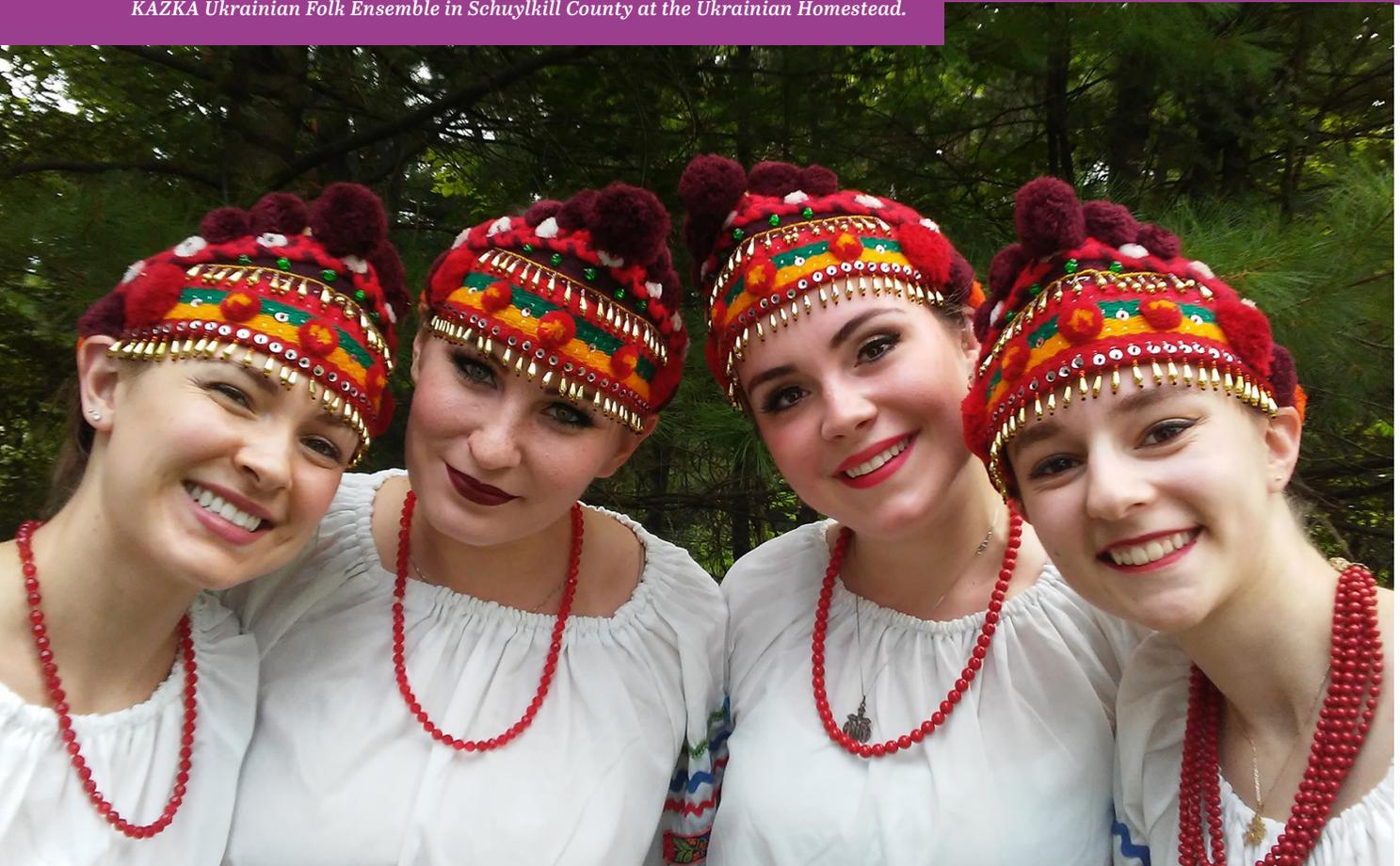


Photo by Sandra Duda

The PA Humanities Discovery Project is a research effort conducted jointly by PA Humanities and researchers at Drexel University’s Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts & Design. It had three project goals: to map, network, and celebrate the humanities landscape; to build a more inclusive and connected community for sharing, learning, and advocacy; and to tell the story of the humanities in Pennsylvania.

Through surveys, focus groups, and listening sessions, the project seeks to better understand **who** across the state is building community using the humanities (even if they wouldn’t necessarily call it the humanities) and **how** cultural and humanities practices are used by people in their professional or volunteer work. PA Humanities embarked on this research to strengthen its voice for the cultural sector as part of its recovery and growth initiatives, as they provided emergency relief, built networks, and shared resources that helped communities and organizations pivot and sustain themselves in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PA Humanities Discovery Project is grounded in a participatory research design and an emergent strategy that focuses *on people, not organizations*. The findings bring to light transformative discoveries and critical issues by looking at how Pennsylvania’s humanities practitioners view, value, practice, and study the humanities. They have powerful implications for how to move forward as a field and the future health and well-being of our communities.

This research is being undertaken at a critical juncture in the humanities, when their existence and value is being called into question and debate. It provides PA Humanities, and other advocates, with a solid foundation for reframing the humanities – and our humanity – as a human right that is essential for creating meaningful change, addressing social challenges, and promoting human flourishing. The PA Humanities Discovery Project is an invitation for you to participate in this conversation and *join the movement*.

Visit DiscoveryProject.info to learn more.

Photo by Julie Louisa Hagenbuch



We use storytelling to show the impact of our work, to share the significant changes in the community, and to empower our neighbors.”

RESEARCH TEAM



The project was led by PA Humanities' Executive Director Laurie Zierer and a collaborative team that spanned programs, research, communications and advocacy, including Dawn Frisby Byers, Nick Crosson, Jennifer Danifo, Katie Jean, Karen Price, Taylor Tolton-Kain, and Jared Valdez. PA Humanities is an independent nonprofit and official federal-state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities. They champion the humanities as a means to build community, educate, inspire, and make change.



Julie Goodman and Andrew Zitcer are faculty in Drexel University's Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts & Design. They led the development, deployment, and interpretation of the survey and focus group instruments. They were supported by research assistant Allison Wright. Jason Schupbach, Dean of Drexel's Westphal College, helped to convene the advisory groups and served as counsel to the project. The mission of the Antoinette Westphal College is to unlock the creativity of critical thinkers, makers, and creators who connect ideas and solve real-world problems, transforming careers and lives.

PARTICIPATORY EMERGENT STRATEGY

The PA Humanities Discovery Project was built on the principles of emergent strategy and a participatory research design. Emergent strategy is a term associated with the work of activist and writer adrienne marie brown that describes emergence as a process by which, through sustained interactions, individuals create patterns that are more sophisticated than what could have been created alone. Emergence is beyond what the sum of its parts could even imagine. PA Humanities adopted the practices of emergent strategy in their participatory, collaborative community programs like Chester Made and PA Heart & Soul. Both projects are built on process and trust, meaning that emerging learning and real-time discoveries are integrated into the work. The Discovery Project adopted this approach, relying on the advisory boards for close communication about the project's design, implementation, interpretation and dissemination. Survey respondents and focus group participants also joined in engaging listening sessions to maximize the opportunity to learn with them.

ELEMENTS of EMERGENT STRATEGY

- Harnesses collective wisdom and creativity
- Emphasizes flexibility, trust, and incremental progress
- Ongoing dialogue and power-sharing
- De-centers the expert, embracing continual learning and real-time adjustments
- Elevates diverse voices and experiences, fostering equity and empathy

GUIDED by VALUES

Over the last decade, PA Humanities has explored the applied humanities over more traditionally defined approaches to the humanities. Creative and artistic practices, storytelling, historical perspectives, personal interpretation, generative brainstorming, and deliberative conversations are the tools that culture and the humanities provide to people every day to make a difference, enact change in their communities, and build a movement together. By moving beyond discipline-centered practice, PA Humanities helps communities build relationships, make spaces for new voices, create empathy and a sense of belonging, support vibrant local communities, foster resiliency and healing, develop leadership skills, improve critical thinking and instill educational tools, and challenge prejudices. The Discovery Project's goals were informed by PA Humanities' mission to champion a redefinition of the humanities and their core values of putting people first, innovating and growing, sharing tools, and building networks.

INSPIRATIONS

The PA Humanities Discovery Project is part of a broader effort by humanities councils and academic researchers to understand the state of the humanities in the public and on college campuses. It was particularly inspired by two prior reports that framed our inquiry process and shed light on the power of the humanities to drive community development, social equity, and change. The first was the groundbreaking study by Indiana Humanities called *Humanities at the Crossroads: The Indiana Case Study*, released in January 2014. Humanities at the Crossroads inquired about the work of organizations involved with the humanities in Indiana. The Discovery Project departs from this approach by focusing on practitioners, using more open-ended questions, and adding focus groups to share experiences in real time.

The second inspiration was PA Humanities' report *Humanities in Action: A National Perspective*, released in 2022 in collaboration with PennPraxis at University of Pennsylvania's Stuart Weitzman School of Design. This report gives national context to PA Humanities' work and shows that the humanities can be a force for equitable social change, and demonstrates synergies between the humanities and the broader field of community development. It also discovered through on the ground interviews that the humanities, although practitioners did not usually identify with the term "humanities," were being used through storytelling to understand identity and create empathy and connection for leadership development, transformation of place and organizations, centering people's perspectives, healing practices, and changing the narrative in community-based work.

WHAT ARE THE APPLIED HUMANITIES?

The PA Humanities Discovery Project seeks to understand how practitioners use the applied humanities in their work. This subset of the public humanities is distinct from traditional academic disciplines, although it borrows their content and tools. The applied humanities use people-centered, action-oriented, and skills-building activities to disrupt power dynamics, foster equity, promote grassroots community planning, and catalyze social change through collaboration and inclusivity.

research methodology

“...you can burn out quickly. It was encouraging to hear people’s feelings about this work [during the Listening Sessions]. Someone said, ‘I can’t not do humanities.’ ... that was cool because this is tough and we need community to do this work.”

-LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

Lycoming College students present about their museum field experiences to peers at the Humanities Research Center.



Photo courtesy of Lycoming College

From 2021 to 2024, the PA Humanities Discovery Project was advised by a cohort of 26 national and local stakeholders, forming the state and national advisory boards. It was guided by principles of emergent strategy and a participatory research design, and brought wide-ranging experiences and perspectives on the humanities from a variety of different sectors as we developed the project, interpreted findings, and reflected on themes and trends.

We sought survey responses from individual practitioners across Pennsylvania – both those who engage in humanities activities professionally and those who do so without financial compensation. Following the completion of the survey period, the research team held eight focus groups. Social network analysis was utilized in both the surveys and focus groups. In 2024, we conducted listening sessions with advisors and research participants to process our findings.

SURVEY SAMPLE SIZE

541 completed surveys	1,170 total responses	4.2% margin of error
		98% confidence level

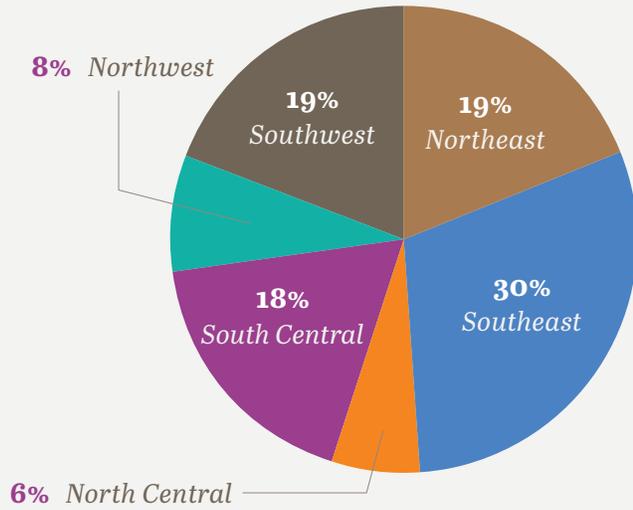
FOCUS GROUPS

5 <i>virtual</i>	3 <i>in-person</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statewide BIPOC • Young practitioners • Northeastern PA • PA Wilds and other rural areas • Practitioners from museums, libraries, and cultural groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spanish language (Reading) • Black practitioners (Philadelphia) • Immigrants/cultural workers (Pittsburgh)

LISTENING SESSIONS

2 <i>virtual</i>	including advisors and survey and focus group participants
------------------	--

{ SURVEY RESPONSES BY REGION }



{ SURVEY RESPONSES BY RACE/ETHNICITY with Hispanic/ Latino/a/x as race }

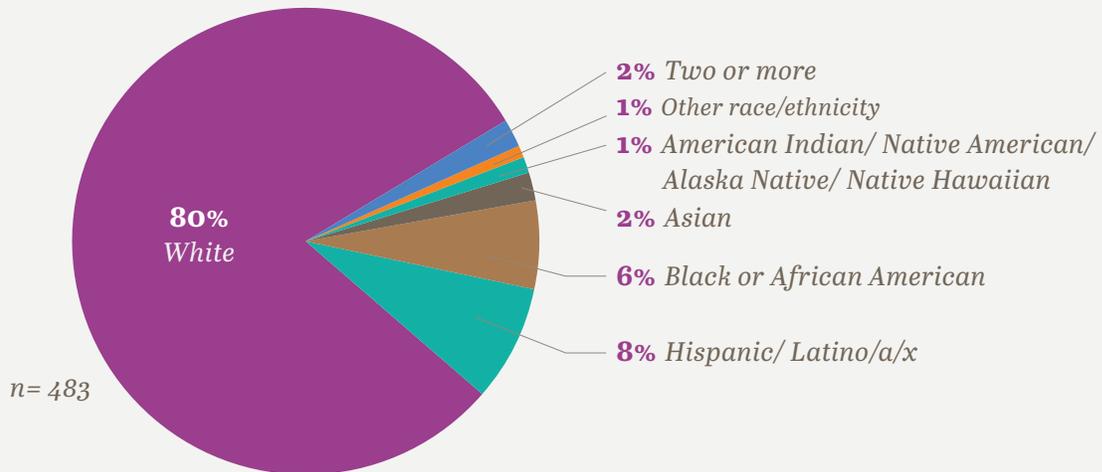




Photo by Klaire Zhan

The Brazilian folk tradition of Capoeira demonstrated at Temple University.

where are we ?

THE STATE OF HUMANITIES IN PA

SECTION

III

“Right now, you know that there’s such a need for connection, right? And we all know where our society is and it seems to me the humanities is the key way that we can connect.”

-SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Reception for Isabel Wilkerson event to kick off PA Humanities’ Voices of History project at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center in Pittsburgh.

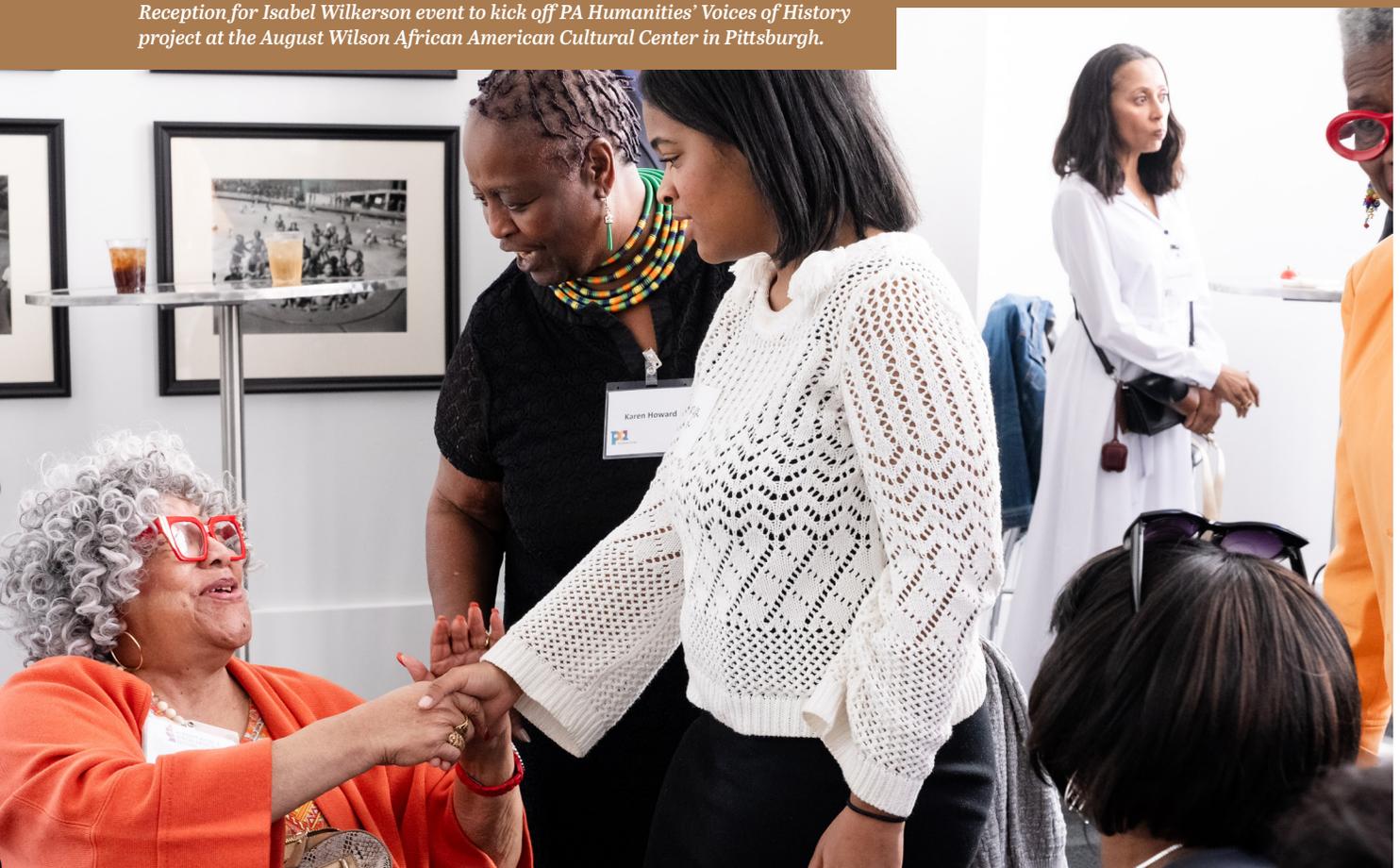


Photo by Joey Kennedy

Rooting the PA Humanities Discovery Project in the voice of humanities practitioners enables us to learn more about how they see their work, why they do it, and its impact. The findings speak to how the humanities power communities by fostering social bonds and creating shared experiences that lead to collective action for positive change.

People are transformed by the humanities, which are a vital part of promoting healthy lives and communities. Most importantly, this work is an integral part of practitioners' identities, who see themselves as change agents and social justice advocates. Many are motivated by their own life experiences, seeking to extend the benefits they have received or to help others address the challenges they have faced.

Photo by Klaire Zhan



The Brazilian folk tradition of Capoeira demonstrated at Temple University.

WHO *are* PA'S HUMANITIES PRACTITIONERS?

Humanities practitioners are people who present, produce, and lead humanities activities, usually in a local community context. They have a strong desire to give back, and they find their careers empowering for themselves and for others. They may work in, and sometimes for, multiple settings such as art galleries, community centers, houses of worship, libraries, museums, theaters, prisons, and educational institutions. They may be engaged as independent contractors, part-time or full-time staff members, solo business entrepreneurs, or volunteers.

HUMANITIES PRACTITIONERS ARE...

- Resilient, but many find it hard obtain resources
- Engage in frequent and diverse types of activities across the state as a tool for personal growth, social change, and justice
- Reflect the overall PA population, with a few distinctions
- Learning the job by doing it and showing up, even if they don't have a humanities degree
- Concerned about identifying and supporting the next generation of leadership to pursue a career in the humanities

The Humanities as an Identity

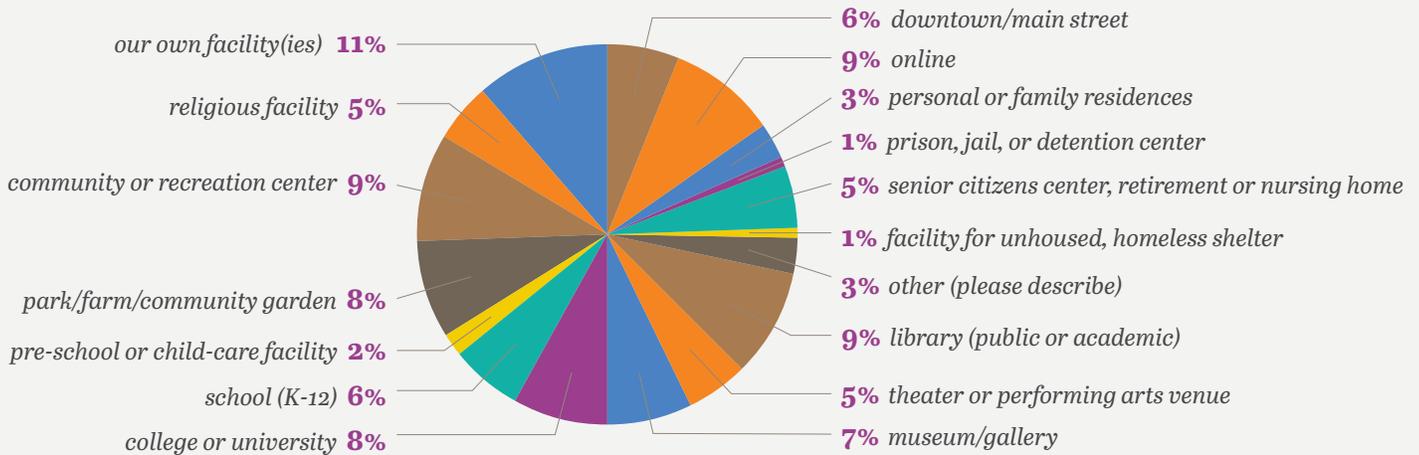
Humanities practitioners see themselves as social justice and education advocates, and believe their work to be a calling and integral to their identity. They see the humanities as:

- Not just as a career, but inspired by very personal and deeply-rooted motivations, linked to role models during their youth
- Typically a lifelong pursuit that's seen as a calling and responsibility to give back
- Motivated by enriching the lives of others, seeing communities thrive and succeed
- Meeting the urgent challenges of our times to address inequities and power Pennsylvania communities
- A passion that is sometimes exploited and lived out in less than ideal working conditions;
- Sorely underfunded, leading to excess workload and eventual burnout

WHAT HUMANITIES ACTIVITY *is* HAPPENING in PA?

Humanities activity happens across the state, involving multiple generations. Neighbors connecting neighbors to community support and services, veterans gathering to share their stories and listen to others, communities coming together to explore and celebrate different cultures and their heritage, teens learning and applying skills of self-expression and creativity to advocate for changes they wish to see in the world – these are all humanities activities. By including activity that occurs in informal settings, such as neighborhood groups or community gardens, as well as activity occurring in more formal settings like libraries and educational organizations, the study presents a more complete picture of applied humanities activity. The research findings demonstrate the strong presence of the use of the humanities as a tool for personal growth, social change, and justice.

{ HUMANITIES PROGRAMS AND EVENTS TAKE PLACE IN A WIDE RANGE OF SPACES }



THEMES of HUMANITIES ACTIVITY in PA

Practitioners across the state are engaged in work that meets the challenges of our times. The four most common themes of humanities activity found in the PA Humanities Discovery Project are **history and preservation**, **social justice**, **health and wellness**, and **youth development**. Many activities in Pennsylvania explore or address multiple themes. The recurring themes tell a powerful story about how the humanities are being deployed for societal and narrative change, as well as health and educational outcomes.

History and Preservation

Engagement with history and preservation is changing among Pennsylvania’s humanities practitioners, as they aim for greater inclusivity in evolving communities. The value of many forms of history, including local, shared, ethnic, and industrial or economic histories, are mentioned frequently. History leads to new discoveries, lifting up previously ignored and untold stories. History and preservation connect to social justice and environmental justice, as well. The choices made about what stories are told and what artifacts are saved determine what we, and future generations, can learn from our past.



I see preservation in itself as a mechanism of social justice, albeit somewhat indirect. By selecting the items and the histories we are going to preserve, we are responsible for determining what future generations will be able to learn about and from.”

Social Justice

Humanities practitioners engage in activism around identity to drive societal change that leads to increased equity. The humanities are transformational tools for social justice, wellness, and community development. Humanities activity plays a pivotal role in reshaping communities, addressing social issues, and fostering wellness. Spaces where humanities activity occurs, such as libraries, often serve as welcoming and inclusive havens for people to come together and explore new narratives and under-represented voices. In the current moment of political polarization, spaces of humanities activity are engaged in important work to create community dialogue, social connection, and to share the otherwise untold stories and lived experiences.

Photo by Terry, LLC.



I want to make the world a better place where everyone has adequate needs such as food, housing, safety, health care and education.”

Performance at Sistah Soul Series, a live musical showcasing BIPOC creatives, in Philadelphia’s Love Park.

Health and Wellness

Humanities practitioners address both physical and mental health in their programming. Many programs are place-based, and encourage healing by providing spaces and activities through which trauma and other stressors can be addressed. Reflecting on our findings, one listening session participant asserted that this kind of work supports our mental health as human beings and how the humanities can “be applied to help address some of the issues that are happening that people are seeking answers for across the globe.”



[We] created kind of semi-private rooms [for the unhoused] during a recent renovation so that human services could be there... [We've] become second responders basically to the human services.”

Youth Development

Having a meaningful presence in people’s lives is an important motivation for many humanities practitioners. Humanities activity provides gathering places and activities for youth across the Commonwealth. Youth development has lifelong, intergenerational benefits. It promotes both self-understanding and empathy for others across the globe, developing people’s capacity for shared humanity. Humanities practitioners in Pennsylvania invest in the future by nurturing, educating, inspiring, and empowering youth, who are the next generation of citizenship and leadership in Pennsylvania’s communities.

Photo courtesy of The Conococheague Institute



I love being able to be a steady and consistent support system in youth’s lives especially in today’s world. To have them smile and see the excitement in their faces when they want to tell me about their day makes it all worth it.”

High school students experience frontier living through The Conococheague Institute’s “Can you 18th Century?” program.

how do we connect and grow?

A DIVERSIFYING LANDSCAPE

SECTION

IV

“The arts and humanities
are the greatest connectors
we have. I feel that I am
engaged in meaningful,
important, life-giving work.”

-SURVEY PARTICIPANT

The Dillsburg Heart & Soul team shares with the local community about their story gathering work at the 106th Annual Farmers Fair.

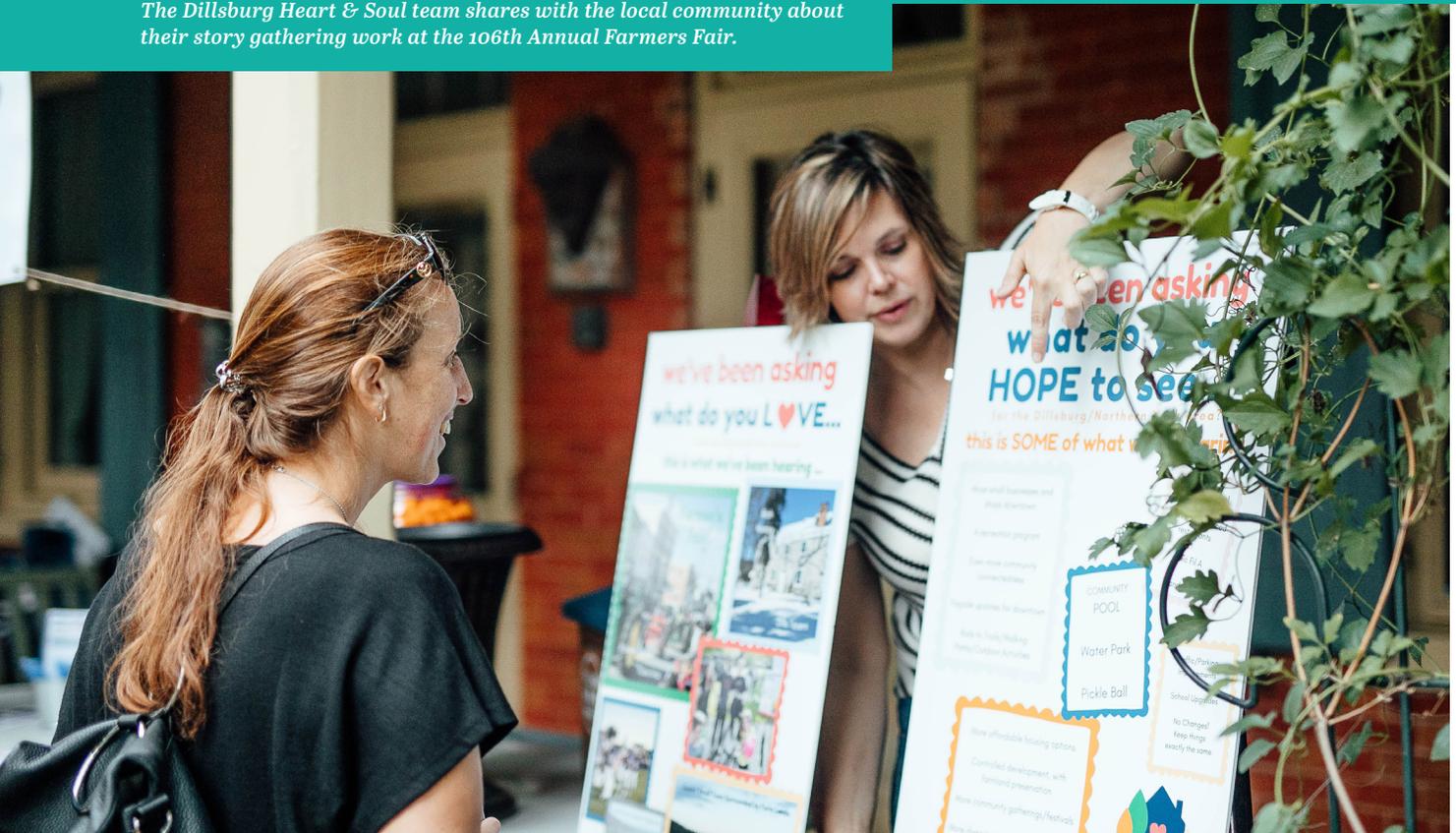


Photo by Bethany Sauer

Humanities practitioners met challenges and embraced opportunities that resulted from the pandemic, political polarization, and calls for racial justice, while they grew increasingly concerned about sustaining the field.

Rather than relying on existing program models, we found many reimagining their work by letting their communities lead the way, putting people’s talents and experience first. This asset-based approach to applied humanities expanded engagement and created spaces of belonging during times of intense isolation and fear. With a new awareness of the importance of social connection fostered by humanities activity, practitioners embraced resilience and ingenuity during a time of uncertainty, playing a pivotal role in shaping a more equitable society with our well being, social justice, and healing at the center.

At the same time, in our focus groups, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) practitioners raised the need for “possibility models” for humanities careers. We also found a widespread lack of volunteers and an underdeveloped career pipeline among all practitioners.



We believe our relevance has increased. The work has changed, in that we are doing more of it outside our walls and through online platforms, resources or outreach efforts.”

IMPACT of 2020-2024

- Shifting programs online and outdoors is a continued opportunity to offer rich, intimate experiences
- Commitment to address a digital divide and redefine accessibility with online books, media, and more
- Lifting practitioners’ own well-being with better salaries, benefits, and conditions
- Rebuilding after a loss of long-time patrons, volunteers, and funders due to the pandemic
- Ongoing stress of adapting to shifting financial and human resources to stay afloat, meet the moment with intention, and grow.

Photo courtesy of Lewisburg Children’s Museum



Gathering of families at Dale’s Ridge exploring nature together through the lens of history and art.

SHIFTS IN PRACTICE

Social connection and humanities activity

Pennsylvania's humanities practitioners noted the growing importance of their work during the pandemic and at a time of increasing political polarization. There was a strong need for people to come back together and their audiences craved inclusive and accessible opportunities to connect. They actively sought to address issues of mental health, trauma and addiction recovery while promoting well-being for youth with socio-emotional learning and building belonging. Through their engagement they saw the emerging link between economic development and community health.



I strongly believe that people, now more than ever, need to establish connections with each other and their communities.”

Connection to community

Humanities practitioners have long partnered with local educational institutions and community centers. The pandemic disrupted conventional modes of connection and interaction, creating a positive shift towards alternative approaches to collaboration and mutually beneficial partnerships. Virtual engagement emerged as a catalyst, stimulating a reassessment of community outreach. This broadened perspective on partnerships and a more people-centered approach, showcased the diversity of collaborative efforts and the multifaceted role networks play in the humanities ecosystem.

TOP NEW PARTNERSHIPS DURING THE PANDEMIC

1. Detention Centers/Prisons
2. Farmer's Markets/Community Gardens
3. Homeless Shelters/Emergency Housing
4. Hospitals/ Clinics/ Health Facilities

Searching for spaces of belonging

The dual circumstances of quarantine closures and heightened public attention to social injustice in 2020 led humanities practitioners to think deeply about spaces of belonging. These are critical for the humanities, allowing for connection, identity, critical inquiry, and trust-building. Neutrality, civility, and safety emerged as concerns in the context of political polarization. Practitioners questioned whether their institutions truly embody safe spaces for dialogue amidst political pressures, including censorship. Practitioners need safe outlets to work through these experiences and how to honor diverse perspectives while providing inclusivity and safety.



We have had very specific instances of challenges [to] LGBTQ materials ... and it's one of those really hard situations to deal with when you just want to provide free access to materials that represent people, no matter who they are...”

THE EXPERIENCES of BIPOC HUMANITIES PRACTITIONERS

The experiences of BIPOC humanities practitioners were explored in depth through two focus groups, both virtual and in-person. They shed light on opportunities for greater career support and the importance of valuing lived or practical experience, mentorship, and multiple pathways to professional success. BIPOC practitioners have significant experience in the humanities, a field that has traditionally favored educational attainment and professional degrees, although most learn on the job or in the community through practical experience. There is a need for greater mentorship and supportive networks, to ensure a diverse and thriving humanities community that represents the communities they serve and has a deeper understanding of those communities’ issues.

Photo courtesy of Ebenezer Maxwell Mansion

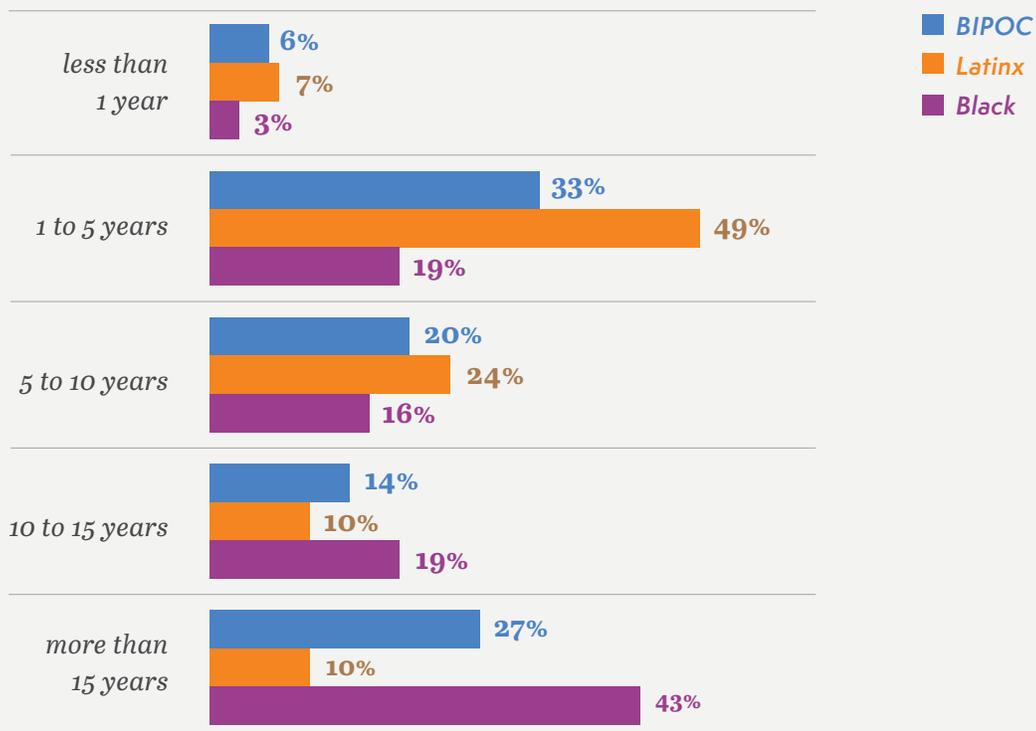


Artist Linda Gail Sanders at work on her mural celebrating 19th-century African American heroes.



This work is important to me because I believe that people possess the power to transform their lives if given the proper tools...

{ BIPOC PRACTITIONERS HAVE SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCE IN THE HUMANITIES }



Possibility Model

“Possibility models” are people who serve as tangible examples and sources of inspiration for others. In the humanities, these models demonstrate the ability to thrive in a field where traditional entry points and guidance may be lacking. In the absence of needed systemic changes, BIPOC possibility models can serve as mentors and demonstrate how to break through existing barriers and traditional gatekeeping. Their experiences and visibility provide a sense of possibility and direction in pursuing similar careers. Community organizations, museums, and arts-activities are all potential anchors for these models and career inspiration, based on our findings.



I never thought I’d work in museums or cultural institutions because nobody told me it was a real job...I wanted to be a possibility model to other people who came into the game late.”

IDENTIFYING *the* NEXT GENERATION of HUMANITIES SUPPORT *and* LEADERSHIP

There is a significant concern among practitioners about who will conduct and support the next generation of humanities activity. This underscores the pivotal role of financial resources, career development opportunities, and professional engagement. Two primary issues – a lack of volunteers and an underdeveloped career pipeline – were raised repeatedly in survey responses and focus group discussions. The older generation is worried about how humanities practice will be transmitted to the next generation. Being a “calling,” as practitioners described their humanities work in our research, has a downside. Lack of funding and, perhaps, societal respect for the profession make it harder to overcome the other challenges like heavy workloads and burnout that practitioners face.

Photo by Mark Welch



The Bucks Mont Regional National History Day Contest presents awards to youth for historical research and learning projects.

Volunteers are getting harder to find

Humanities practitioners have voiced apprehensions regarding volunteer retention in the post-pandemic phase, particularly as organizations endeavor to rebuild their volunteer databases following a hiatus in in-person opportunities due to organizational closures. Volunteer board members and unpaid practitioners represent a prevalent labor group, second only to full-time practitioners. Additionally, practitioners have acknowledged the challenge of retaining younger volunteers. This trend is potentially attributed to a shifting economic landscape where people opt for financial contributions rather than active participation.



Most of us are in our seventies, and that's becoming a real concern... I don't see the 30, 40, even the 50-year-olds stepping up to help in volunteer organizations."

Who's Next? Challenges in the Humanities Career Pipeline

Younger humanities practitioners are facing challenges related to burnout, an undervalued field, and an underdeveloped career pipeline. This underscores the critical need for a nuanced examination of the working conditions and career support, particularly regarding their well-being, resilience, and career pathway development and opportunities.

Photo by Daniel Burke



Teen Reading Lounge facilitator at the Lucien E. Blackwell West Philadelphia Regional Library.



So, in my own job, I have to do the entirety of the work with our teen population, in addition to working with our Makerspace, in addition to working with circulation and being a front-facing person in that department and doing grant writing. And it's one of those jobs where I love what I do and I really enjoy it. But I am very tired, and I'm only 25, so I really shouldn't be this tired already."

WHY IS **humanities**
work
important?

**“This is what I have
chosen as my life pursuit.
It is extremely important
to me. I want people to
be heard. I want to help
people fulfill their
dreams...”**

-SURVEY PARTICIPANT

*3 Dots Downtown immersive puppetry installation created
with meaningful community donated objects.*



TOP THEMES *from the PARTICIPANTS*

When exploring how humanities practitioners describe their work, we coded all the responses from the survey and explored quotes from the focus groups to determine which themes were brought up the most. The top themes were: **providing a community hub, historic preservation, deepening connections to culture, and social connection.** Other prominent themes included supporting youth, social justice, storytelling, and creating safe spaces.

Providing a Community Hub

Participants stated that they serve everyone in their own community as well as people in neighboring areas. Humanities often takes place in community-based spaces – not a city hall or typical space of power. These non-traditional places increase agency, power, and influence created by people, not by institutions. The public humanities provides places for people to gather together and create fellowship. They provide safe, judgment-free spaces in which people can fully embrace their sense of self and expand their horizons without limitations of time or cost. They create vital third places for diverse communities struggling to connect.

 **Our mission statement is to act as a community hub; a welcoming place for all people to learn, grow, and connect.”**

Historic Preservation

There is a strong current of the importance of preserving and sharing history, whether the preservation of tangible, physical history or the intangible history of cultural, social, and political narratives. Participants saw preservation as a form of advocacy: advocacy for history and the sites and resources that comprise it. The work of elevating often-suppressed or under acknowledged histories is a passion for those who value people’s knowledge of the past and lifting aspects of history that remain unknown. There is also an emphasis on how social justice intersects with history, and art makes the past come alive with fresh interpretations that appeal to new audiences.

 **[We] use the word preservation, and we say that in terms of preserving Centre County history and also advocacy work for the preservation of historic sites and resources.”**

Deepening Connections to Culture

The arts and humanities travel together, providing intergenerational transmission and preservation of culture through programs and events that are often free to the public. Respondents’ spoke of their mission to enrich humanity and the social conditions of their communities, linking the term “humanities” to denote shared humanity as a concept and a practice in the world. Art and culture are seen as intimately connected to, if not a subset of, the humanities.

 **[We] transmit and make known to our children and community our traditions and culture through dance.”**

Social Connection

The connections among people and places fostered by applied humanities practice builds community capacity, social capital, and sets the ground for social justice. This theme unites the others, building connections across differences, whether of age, gender, race/ethnicity, or even political orientation. Art appreciation, historical preservation, and serving as a community hub advance social connection among Pennsylvanians and beyond.

 **We have tons of volunteers that come and pinch pierogies and make ethnic food, but it also has a connection to the community because a lot of those people are elderly that live around our property. ... It keeps them from being isolated.”**

WHAT MOTIVATES PRACTITIONERS *to DO THIS WORK?*

Reframing the humanities in terms of personal benefits and motivations offers a new way to think about the practice in terms of our experience, our humanity, and as a fundamental human right. We asked practitioners what motivates them to do this work, and why it is important to them. The coded survey responses highlighted their top motivations: *enriching the lives of others, fostering community success, love of the work, and learning from history*. Other themes included arts awareness and generating reciprocity between practitioners and audiences.

Enriching the lives of others

Being culturally responsive was an important goal and benefit, with one practitioner describing it as “critical community work” to help people understand different cultures. Some of this work is an uphill climb, especially in settings where Native American history is often forgotten or ignored. Others spoke of being a “silent champion,” opening doors for the young people who need their support, and transforming the narratives that seemingly govern some young people’s life chances. This work also was seen as saving lives and countering burnout. The humanities provides space and time to have conversations and activities that allow people to lean into their creativity, finding time and space to pursue their passions for things like history, craft, storytelling, and literature.



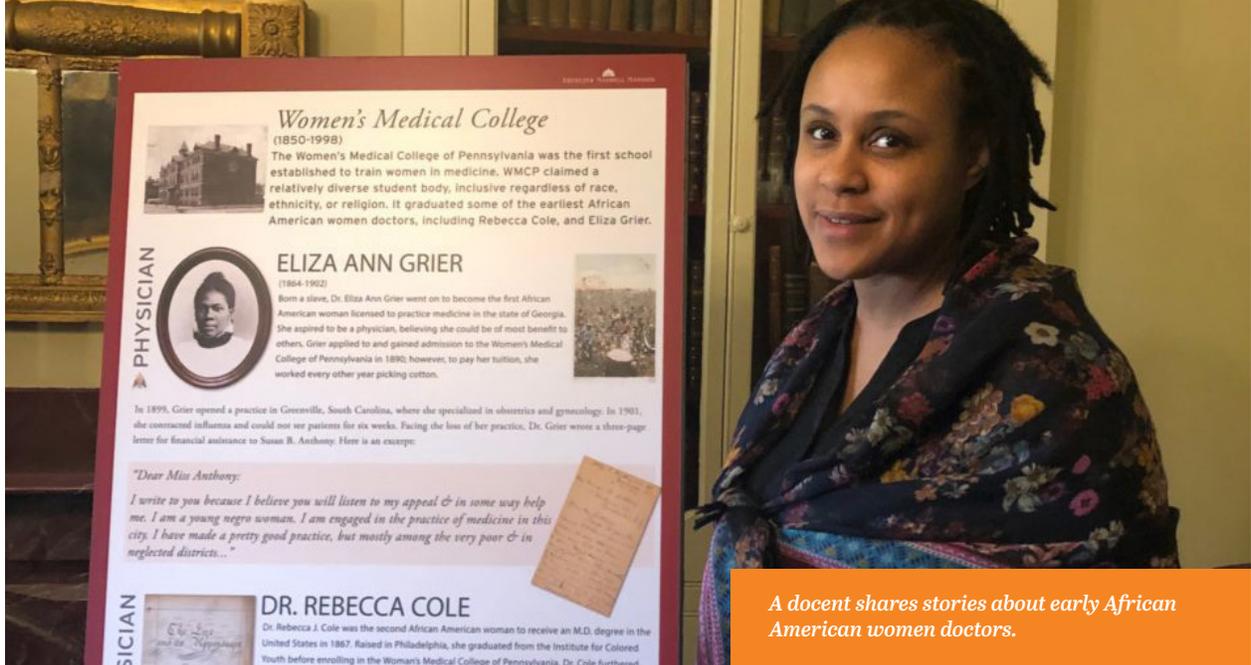
We’re trying to reach the largest amount of underserved people...with free musical programs to the public. So we’re trying to... enrich humanity in that way and enrich the social structure of the area also.”

Community Success

Threatened by political polarization, declining population, or frayed social connection, the humanities can be a way to knit back together community ties through positive interactions. Pursuit of community success was often framed as place-based work and was achieved through weaving strong social fabric and social connections. Respondents spoke of wanting people to feel welcome and to stay in the community despite the great changes their communities were facing, even invoking Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “beloved community” as a goal.



My love of this place, this land and all its living beings, is the main motivation. I also have hope that some of the stories we tell will make a difference for the future health of this place.”



A docent shares stories about early African American women doctors.

Love of the Work

One of the most affecting themes in the research was the love and dedication with which practitioners pursued humanities work. They spoke of humanities work providing a sense of purpose and belonging. For some, this passion took the form of a love of learning and of sharing histories and stories across time and generations. The goals of social and environmental justice animate the work of many humanities practitioners. Many of the participants spoke of the work as a mission and a calling, but it takes an incredible amount of resources to do this job well.



It would be easier to ask what doesn't motivate me to do this work. This is the work; what gets me up in the morning and inspires me."

Learning from History

Many practitioners are motivated to do this work to learn, and help others learn, from history. One theme is the desire to advance new narratives that can recover untold or suppressed histories, and support new understandings of people and place throughout Pennsylvania while connecting and reconnecting individuals in their communities. This is important and challenging work, especially in political climates that are fraught with many forms of division.



I feel strongly that connecting to our shared history is an enterprise in civic action."

HUMANITIES WORK *is* VITAL, BUT *is* THERE A MARKETING PROBLEM?

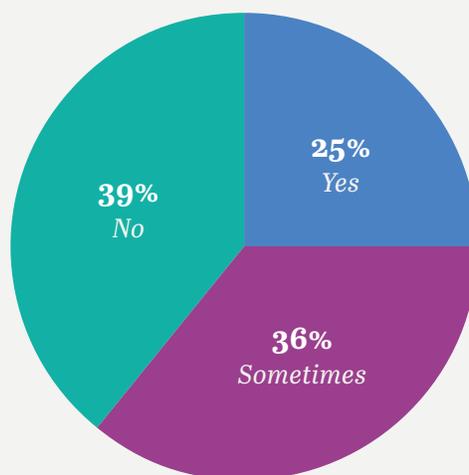
Survey respondents rarely use the word “humanities” to describe their work, except when talking to funders, applying for grants, or talking about human rights and human flourishing. Many associate it with subjects like history and other academic disciplines. They also find the term alienating to their audiences and reflective of gatekeeping in academia.

This supports other research about a general lack of understanding about the word. The humanities have a branding problem and need to be reframed in a way that brings them to life in the mind of the public as education for life – not only a career – and a means to solve grand challenges of our time.



I’d say it’s human-centered work. I’ve never actually used the word humanities, but I always end up using the word like humanity.”

{ PRACTITIONERS WHO USE THE TERM “HUMANITIES” WHEN DESCRIBING THEIR PROJECTS OR PROGRAMS }



Rain Poetry project participant during the haiku reveal and community celebration at the Lillian Marrero Library in North Philadelphia.

Making the case for the humanities

Building a case for support of the humanities is vital, in a context where they are sometimes seen as in decline relative to other fields or a “frill.” We can start by connecting our language to the real world experiences and motivations of practitioners and the individual and community benefits of this work.



We have focused on STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] for so long that we often forget about the humanities to our detriment.”

Photo by Greg Irvin



Benefits of the work

Participants mentioned intrinsic motivations for doing humanities work 2.6 times for every 1 time they mentioned extrinsic values. These intrinsic benefits (which provide meaning, pleasure, cognitive growth, increased empathy, communal understanding, and social bonds) can be both individual and communal. Most arts and culture advocacy focuses on important extrinsic benefits, like economic growth and test scores, and advocates will hone their messages accordingly to resonate with those who control the distribution of funding resources. Yet humanities clearly possesses both intrinsic and extrinsic impacts. When these are set against each other in a binary or a hierarchy that one is better than the other, they are not representative of the full range of benefits of the humanities.



It empowers people to see themselves as having the skills needed to connect with others, express themselves, and build resistance against people who seek to exploit or oppress them.”

HUMAN FLOURISHING & HAPPINESS: A CAPABILITIES APPROACH

The capabilities approach is a belief that there are certain qualities of life that are fundamental to human flourishing and happiness, and need to be fostered among all people in order to allow them to live a good life with meaning and agency for themselves and their community.

The humanities help us to discover meaning in our lives, prosper, and build our futures together. The capabilities approach offers a new way of looking at the incredible value of the humanities, seeing them as a fundamental human right. It is a belief grounded in recent research that there are certain qualities of life that are fundamental to human flourishing and happiness beyond solely economic metric. Individual and community well-being require freedom to engage in humanities activities, allowing people to realize their potential and express their humanity. This promotes social justice, transformation, and the empowerment of communities.

The approach further aligns with the UNESCO's Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948, which states that, "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." As the arm of the United Nations charged with international cooperation, knowledge sharing, and mutual understanding, UNESCO champions everyone's right to culture as part of human development. By focusing on human flourishing as a key goal of the humanities, it is possible to link the humanities with the happiness we experience when we live a life of meaning and purpose, a focus on living the good life through humanities inquiry and practice. This is humanities for the benefit of humanity, a people-centered effort that reconnects us with the best elements of our shared human past, and leads towards a more sustainable future.



Sharing experiences and stories as well as creating new ones together fosters a more connected and resilient community; provides opportunity to learn and gain new perspectives, and develops a sense of community that is essential to well-being."

reframing the humanities

IN PENNSYLVANIA

SECTION

VI

I love the fact that PA Humanities is bringing people together, reminding them of humanity in a time when there's so much polarization; when there's so much technology that often comes between [people]—you know, face to face engagement.”

-SURVEY PARTICIPANT

Young people at Barrio Alegria's Storytelling Through Dance performance at the steps of the Reading Public Library.



Photo by Margo Reed

The humanities in Pennsylvania are a vital, engaging, and human-centered practice. As a fundamental human right and a part of human flourishing and happiness, the humanities have much to offer.

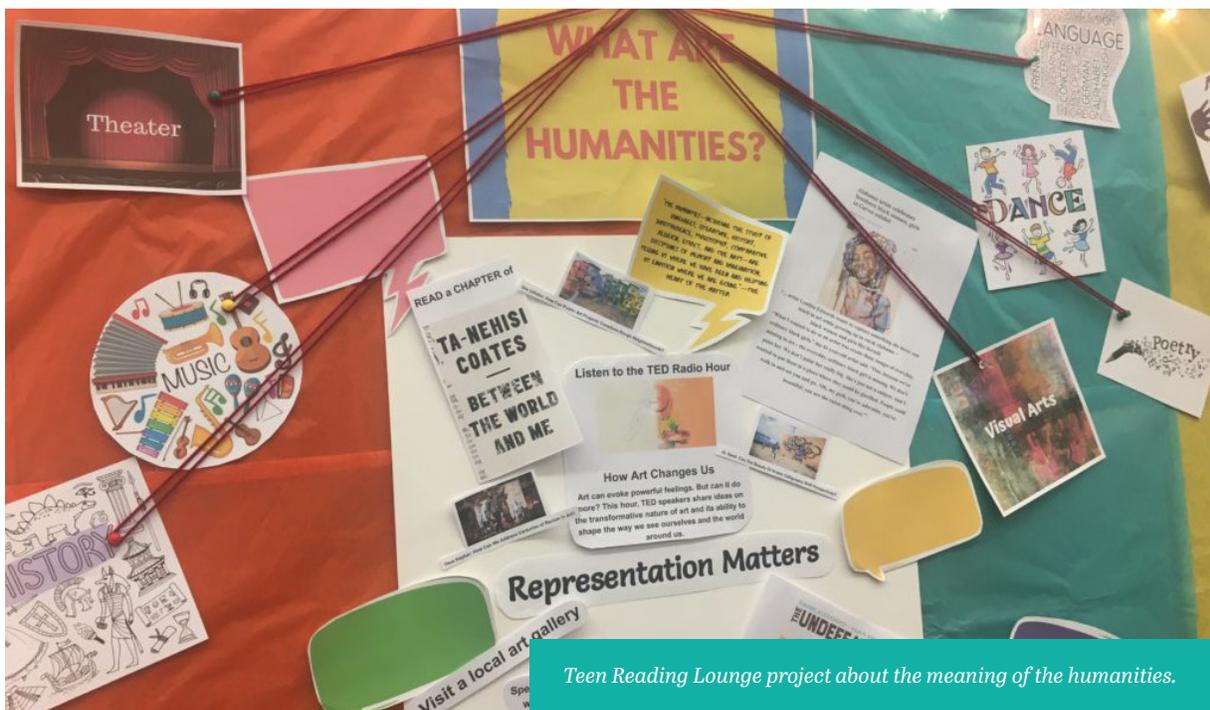
Our research has demonstrated that practitioners have a range of backgrounds, specializations, and identities. They are driven by passion and animated by a shared sense of humanity to pursue this work. The last several years have been challenging for the sector, and practitioners have risen to these challenges with aplomb, deepening existing partnerships and increasing access to the humanities for the public.

In this final section, we make recommendations on how to move forward as a field through six calls to action statements, closing with an invitation to join the movement to reframe the humanities, and embrace a larger vision of its diverse people and practices.

CALL to ACTION

1. Explore a strategic reframing of the humanities as a fundamental human right that emphasizes their roots in the human experience and in our humanity and that better describes the powerful work happening across sectors. Our participants agree that the humanities are core to human flourishing – that they connect, unify, and uplift. This is an urgent update to the way we talk about and advocate for the humanities. Looking ahead, more of this human-centered, community-driven work is deeply needed. By demystifying our shared language around humanities, we can be poised for collective action and able to seize new opportunities for meaningful change. Programmatic and rebranding efforts, like PA Humanities redefining the humanities as a people-centered pursuit, crafting the tagline, “We find the human connection in the humanities,” is an example to the field.

Photo courtesy of PA Humanities



Teen Reading Lounge project about the meaning of the humanities.

2. Amplify the lived experiences of BIPOC communities, celebrating and honoring this important asset. Local knowledge should be upheld and supported in the same way the field traditionally recognizes higher education and professional titles in the humanities. In addition, diversifying the staff at cultural and educational institutions can inspire students of color to pursue the humanities as a viable career path. BIPOC-focused professional development and support programs are also needed, including the creation of affinity spaces, continuing education and training opportunities, and further research to highlight BIPOC experiences, needs, and impact.



It's a missed opportunity if you're not really talking about this as collective community healing. Words like 'belonging,' 'healing,' and 'community' are important words, particularly when you are amplifying the voices of underrepresented groups."

3. Develop career guidance, mentorships, and support systems for younger and emerging humanities practitioners, leveraging the value of lived experiences and alternative pathways. Despite an increasing global focus on STEM, there are many fulfilling and diverse career opportunities available in the humanities at all career levels. The humanities infrastructure needs to be widened and strengthened to support the emergence of younger and new practitioners as well as the work of longstanding contributors to the field. Possibility models show different paths to career success. These need to be identified and lifted up for others. Learning networks, like the ones PA Humanities builds for its grantees to share strategies, can serve as models to reach practitioners in locations where networks need additional support. Partnerships can be built with cultural and educational institutions to provide workshops and professional development.



The whole idea that museums could be a career was something that I didn't experience until much later. Even though I grew up in a city where a high percent[age] of the population are over-educated. It's a big time college town. My parents were not people who went to museums. When I worked at [a children's museum] here in Pittsburgh, we talked about all the kids who came with school groups that would never visit a museum except with a school group. And that was me."

Teens from West Philadelphia High School present their innovative start-up ideas at the Paul Robeson House & Museum.



Photo courtesy of PA Humanities



Farm Arts Collective provides “agri-cultural” experiences through performances, workshops, and community events in Damascus.

Photo courtesy of Farm Arts Collective

4. Boost community engagement and volunteer opportunities through training, mentorship, and public awareness campaigns that cultivate an interest in the humanities. We learned that generational and demographic shifts are adversely affecting the volunteer support pipeline, and that new strategies of recruiting and supporting volunteers are needed – if it’s board service, training as a museum docent, or helping to paint a community mural. There must be more accessible and rewarding pathways for those looking to engage with their communities that can motivate participation and foster a deeper sense of fulfillment. This could be achieved through a range of opportunities and incentives, including incorporating new technologies, paying volunteers, and raising public awareness of volunteer opportunities and benefits.



It’s harder to bring [volunteers] in. You may be able to bring them in for the program, bringing their kids as a participant, but it’s very hard to engage with the full-time working parents right now.”

5. Broaden the spectrum of resources available for applied humanities activity to fuel growth and innovation across the field. We need to embrace a more holistic view that puts people first, investing in human capital in a way that builds capacity and collaborative energy. Dedicated funding, collaborative networks, and trust-based investments offer promising alternatives to the status quo. It is not just about increasing the financial investment in the humanities; it’s about enriching the field with a diverse array of technical, social, and cultural resources. Funders, policymakers, universities, and community leaders can co-create a more vibrant, inclusive and resilient ecosystem for the humanities to thrive.



Passion is sort of what’s expected to drive us in our jobs, and we get told that a lot... but they don’t realize that that workload and the lack of funding puts barriers in place to us being able to do it well, and in the long term.”

6. Engage in research that lifts up the voices of practitioners, using emergent processes that open us up to learn new things in new ways. These methods generate different, authentic results that build community and learning. As an example, the Discovery Project’s focus group on Latinx experiences in Reading, conducted entirely in Spanish with local facilitators, offered practitioners a more comfortable and authentic space to share their stories and perspectives more deeply without barriers. As researchers, grantmakers, and thought leaders we have to let go and work with others to learn the importance of cultural practice in communities, and do this with rigor and intention.



Take all of these people who filled out the surveys and find a way to make that... a bouquet of different flowers. That would be useful. It’s just not a dozen roses.”

JOIN *the* MOVEMENT

The findings from the PA Humanities Discovery Project not only illuminate the profound impact of the humanities in Pennsylvania but also celebrate the diverse “bouquet” of people and practices that enrich our everyday lives. At PA Humanities, our commitment to learning and co-creating through research and conversation has been further strengthened by undertaking this deep process of discovery. With this fuller understanding of our diverse, interdependent humanities landscape, we are more committed than ever to our community-based work and advocating for the humanities and its practitioners.

This research provides PA Humanities, and other advocates, with a solid foundation for explaining how the humanities are essential for creating meaningful change, addressing social challenges, and promoting human flourishing.

The PA Humanities Discovery Project shows that there is still much to be done to reframe and sustain the humanities. Together, we need to grow the field with passionate practitioners, volunteers, advocates, and supporters from different walks of life. **How do our transformative discoveries and emerging issues show up in your work and in your communities? What’s your call to action for the humanities?**

We invite you to join the movement and participate in this important conversation about reframing the humanities. Visit DiscoveryProject.info or PAHumanities.org to connect with us and learn more about this research. Let us continue to share, learn, and grow, building a future where everyone can thrive.



“What you pay attention to grows.”

-adrienne maree brown

Special Thanks

We wish to thank the many practitioners who participated in our surveys, focus groups, and listening sessions. Your stories and insights were invaluable to this research. Your dedication to enriching our communities through the humanities is the foundation of this project.

National Advisors

Tailinh Agoyo, Keira Amstutz, Savannah Barrett, Ben Fink, Patrice R. Green, Karen Kenton, Pam Korza, Peter Levine, Jeremy Liu, Elizabeth Lynn, Clifford Murphy, Michael Rohd, Alison Shott, Regina Smith, and Vanessa Whang.

State Advisors

Rodney Camarce, Dr. Meagan Corrado, DSW, LCSW, Daniel Egusquiza, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, Spud Marshall, Sarah Merritt, Michael O’Bryan, Todd Pousley, Andrew Sheaf, Jennifer Turnbull, and Tree Nuzzio.

Drexel University

Jason Schupbach, Neville Vakharia, and Allison Wright.

PA Humanities

Nicholas Crosson, Jen Danifo, Katie Jean, Karen Price, and Taylor Tolton-Kain.

Funding

Major funding for the project came from PA Humanities’ federal partner, the National Endowment for the Humanities, as part of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, as well as the National Endowment for the Arts, and individual donors.

Organizational Support

Pennsylvania Historical and Museums Commission, PA Museums, Office of Commonwealth Libraries, Pennsylvania Council for the Arts, Americans for the Arts, American Association for State and Local History, Citizens for the Arts in Pennsylvania, Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, and Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council.



Photo by Ryan Fretz

The Mount Gretna Outdoor Art Show attracts visitors to the Pennsylvania Chautauqua community.



PA HUMANITIES
DISCOVERY PROJECT

DiscoveryProject.info