

“How can we model the behavior we seek to inspire?” An On-going Series

Reading and Literacy

“How can we model the behavior we seek to inspire? Do our boards, staff and volunteers reflect the diversity of the communities we serve? How can we be more inclusive?” –theme of the November 2013 Federation of State Humanities Council conference in Birmingham, Alabama.¹

State humanities councils are filled with book people. They celebrate books and words and ideas and ways to talk about all of them. According to the 2012 compliance plans submitted annually to NEH by councils, every council but one supports reading and discussion programs, 51 councils carry out programs in libraries, and 37 support family and adult literacy programs. Thirteen councils host or support book festivals and six are actively involved with statewide “one book” annual reading programs. Ten serve as their state’s Center for the Book in affiliation with the Library of Congress. Councils not only program around books, a number also publish books, some of which are bilingual.

Councils use books to broaden their audience reach. Virginia Foundation for the Humanities’ Virginia Arts of the Book Center, for example, is holding a six-week class in book-binding in April and May. Humanities Tennessee has a book review website, Chapter 16. Humanities Washington’s annual fundraiser, “Bedtime Stories,” features critically acclaimed Northwest writers unveiling original short stories created specifically for the event. The Maine Humanities Council’s “Winter Weekend,” a retreat with discussions focused on one book—Dickens’ *Great Expectations* in 2013, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* next year—uses the net income from the fees it collects from older wealthier patrons to help fund its “New Books, New Readers” program. The Maine Humanities Council also founded the acclaimed “Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Healthcare” reading and discussion program for healthcare providers that has state humanities council partners around the country, and can be found in veterans’ hospitals and in Argentina.

Discovering U.S. literacy rates is challenging and what exists is fundamentally flawed. The latest such data collection was done in 2003 by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, in its National Assessment of Adult Literacy. The title of the piece indicates its lack of reliability: “State & County Estimates of Low Literacy.” This analysis is of those over age 16 who lack basic prose reading skills and carries the caveat that these data also reflect “those who could not be tested due to language barriers.” A result is that there appears to be higher levels of reading skills in smaller or more homogeneous states and counties than in those with diverse populations. For example, South Dakota ranks high whereas New York ranks low. The key thing is to see these data as suggestion of rather than as demonstration of reality. Nonetheless, they suggest that the U.S. literacy rate is approximately 86% for those age 16 and older. That is in the ballpark with UNESCO’s assessment of global literacy, released in September 2012. Using adults age 15 and older, UNESCO rates global literacy (not including the English-speaking world and Western Europe) at 84%.

In the following council thumbnails, we will look at the contexts affecting reading and literacy in nine states.² Of these nine, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Maine have high literacy rates (93%); Washington (90%), Maryland (89%), and Tennessee (87%) fall above the national average; and both Nevada and Mississippi at 84% and New York with 78%, fall below the national average. Of these councils, seven host or support book festivals; two have state-wide “one book” programs, five do literacy programs of various sorts, one has an book-themed fundraiser and sponsors its state’s poet laureate, and all have reading and discussion programs. Here is the landscape in which they support books and literacy, as described in their self-assessment reports.³

- Eighty-six percent of **South Dakota**'s overall population is identified as "White persons not Hispanic," indicating significant racial homogeneity. With less than 11 people per square mile, South Dakota nonetheless supports a subtle "global village." Its indigenous population includes members of the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota tribes, and it is home to descendants of 19th-century northern Europeans and increasing numbers of Africans and Hispanics. Over one-fifth of the population holds a baccalaureate or higher degree, although only 30% of its American Indian young people graduate from high school. Rural libraries often serve wide stretches of countryside and only 48% of libraries across the state are open full time. Yet in the recent difficult economy, libraries have tended to increase rather than decrease their public service hours.
- The University of **Wisconsin** continues to believe in the Wisconsin Idea, that the boundaries of the classroom are the boundaries of the state. The recent merger of University of Wisconsin-Extension and the University's network of two-year liberal arts campuses has shaken up these institutions in ways that may increase the interest of some chancellors and scholars in doing more public humanities work. There are hundreds of programmatically active libraries, historical societies, museums, and local arts organizations, including in many small communities. Milwaukee presents challenges because of its size and other realities such as its infamously troubled school system, segregation, and poverty. Of the relatively small anticipated growth in the population in the next ten years, two-thirds is expected to be among minority communities.
- Cultural life in **Maine** is alive and well, if very unevenly distributed. That is not to say that both nonprofit and state-supported cultural organizations and institutions are not financially stressed, cutting hours and services, but there is a sense of the crucial nature of their offerings and an understanding that when everything else fails, it is to culture—the humanities—that one turns. This claim however, is qualified by a recognition that, given Maine's widely dispersed population, there are areas and populations that are desperately underserved. Maine's non-white population has increased from 3% to 5%, largely because of an influx of political refugees from Central Africa. These immigrants, who speak dozens of languages, have meant unprecedented challenges to the education and social service systems.
- The 13th most populous state, **Washington** is 72% white (not Hispanic) but its cities have an influx of Asian, Latin American, and Russian immigrants. Over 70 languages are spoken in Seattle public schools. The liberal arts and humanities are taught in all four-year colleges and universities and in many community colleges. Ninety percent of Washingtonians have high school degrees and 31% have college degrees. Eastern Washington is predominantly rural and agricultural, with a smaller and primarily white and Latino population; the far western Olympic Peninsula is also rural. The highly urbanized I-5 corridor is ethnically diverse and has the majority of the state's population. The biggest industries are aviation, technology, agriculture, forestry, and fisheries/maritime.
- Despite the fact that **Maryland** has a higher percentage of minority populations than the U.S. overall, its diversity is localized. Over 91% of Western Maryland is white. Central Maryland, including counties such as Prince George's, Baltimore, and Montgomery, are more evenly mixed, averaging 66% white. Prince George's county and Baltimore City, however, consist of a predominantly minority population with nearly 65% Black or African American residents. Maryland is the wealthiest state in the nation, yet 22% of the population of Baltimore City lives in poverty. It is also well-educated in terms of public education at all levels, including higher education. The Maryland State School System has been ranked first in the nation for the last five years. Nonetheless, Maryland ranks only 10th out of the 50 states for child well-being.
- The landscape of **Tennessee** is largely sprawl with urban clusters serving the functions cities used to serve. Communities of place, when they exist, are tenuous and fragile. The state is 79% white and 17% African American. Four percent of the population is now Hispanic. Tennessee

does not have an income tax and though its sales taxes are among the highest in the nation, budget crises are routine and the state educational and cultural organizations continue to suffer. There are ten state-supported universities and thirteen community colleges, along with thirty-five private colleges and universities. There are no longer book editors in Tennessee newspapers and in 2010 the last independent bookstore in Nashville closed. A new independent bookstore, however, has since been opened by writer Ann Patchett.

- Seventy-three percent of **Nevada's** population lives in the Las Vegas metropolitan area and 15% of the population lives in the state's other major metropolitan area, Reno. The remaining 12% of the population resides in the remaining 14 counties which make up the majority of the geographic area of the state. Nevada is simultaneously one of the most urban and one of the most rural states. Some of its counties are classified as "frontier" because they have less than six people living per square mile. According to recent census data, Nevada is 62% White and 27% Hispanic. The state's demographer, however, estimates that the number of Hispanics living in the state may be closer to one-third. The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering is produced by the Western Folklife Center and held annually in Elko.
- A state of contrasts, **Mississippi's** contributions to American and world culture in the 20th and 21st centuries are unparalleled, particularly in literature. Call to mind William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, Margaret Walker Alexander, Shelby Foote, Walker Percy. Think of Eli Evans, Willie Morris, Natasha Trethewey. Then be reminded that Mississippi is number one on far too many lists of other kinds: inadequate education for its children, the number of families and children at or below the poverty level, illnesses and diseases often related to poverty and lack of education, obesity on the one hand and food-challenged children and elders on the other, inadequate health care, low-level and non-readers, single-parent households, lack of infrastructure to meet the needs of its poorest citizens.
- Twenty-two percent of New Yorkers are foreign-born, almost 10% above the national average. **New York** has an overall population that is 58% non-Hispanic White, 18% African American, 18% Hispanic, and 8% Asian. It continues to be an immigration hub: in Queens, the most diverse county in the country, 138 languages are spoken. Beyond New York City, there is an increasing trend among immigrants from all over the world to settle immediately in suburbs and smaller towns and cities. Central New York, for example, has encouraged refugees to settle there from Eastern Africa and Serbia. The collective education level for New Yorkers (32% of citizens over age 24 hold at least a bachelor's degree) is 4% higher than the national average; Rochester once boasted the highest number of PhDs per capita in the nation.

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¹ In 2013, each issue of Federal/State Partnership's *Working Together* newsletter is surveying the challenges councils face within their states and jurisdictions as they confront such issues as geography, educational and cultural resources, audiences and demography, technology, and the economy. The primary source for these surveys is the contextual section of councils' self-assessment reports, augmented as needed by census and other data. We will use examples from all 56 state and jurisdictional humanities councils in this series. Each article is available online in both Federal/State Partnership's e-newsletter archive and in its Resource Library.

² Here the decade-old U.S. data percentages are reversed from low to high—from those *lacking* basic prose reading skills to those *possessing* prose reading skills.

³ The executives of each of these councils have reviewed and, in some cases, edited these thumbnails.