

The Location and Impact of the Work of the Wisconsin Humanities Council
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The Wisconsin Humanities Council devoted considerable staff time to in-depth analysis of where its service has been located. We took a year to collate a decade of data from multiple sources about every WHC funded-program down to the event level, and to work with the University of Wisconsin Applied Population Lab to produce maps and tables that represent every WHC-funded event for the years 2000-2009. We were able to append data from the US Census, so we can examine such things as the sizes of communities served and income data. The maps and associated information were used to perform a gap analysis of WHC statewide service and thus to identify counties meriting additional attention. Among the key findings of this gap analysis was the fact that, contrary to our fears, the WHC is not underserving the northern half of the state. In the decade we studied, the northern half of the state was served with WHC programming in proportion to the size of the population. We also confirmed our belief that Madison was being “overserved” due to the location of the Wisconsin Book Festival there. Milwaukee, as we had suspected, is underserved in relation to the size of its population. Special local mapping of Milwaukee enables us to see at the neighborhood level where we have had a presence.

County by county, and by neighborhood in Milwaukee, we are able to identify priorities for future service. We are also able to report on the WHC’s success in serving communities of all sizes around the state, and on the income distribution of the places we have served. We are pleased to see that all of these measures show service that is quite diverse.

As the result of the gap analysis and program assessment work, the WHC made the major decision to look for a new home for the Wisconsin Book Festival. A lot of time in 2012 was devoted to meetings with program partners and to managing media attention around what was ultimately a successful handing off of the festival to the Madison Public Library, which will host its first version of the festival in October 2013.

The assessment also resulted in reaffirmation of the centrality of the grant program to the WHC, and its value in addressing the WHC’s mission. To reach our conclusion about the future of the grant program, we analyzed three years of funded grants as noted above, and did impact studies of a number of programs. We then began working on changes to the grant program, purpose of which are to bring the program even more closely in line with our benchmarks, i.e., to result in the WHC funding of an even higher proportion of proposals that do a very good job of addressing the benchmarks.

Assessment of our former and current iteration of a Speakers Bureau resulted in a recommendation by the Program Committee that we consider putting more resources into some form of easy access programming along the lines of the Speakers Bureau—a program that we all but shut down a few years ago. Gap analysis work helped to show us the ways in which, at one time, our Speakers Bureau helped us reach the state in ways that no other program did. Further analysis showed us that the Speakers Bureau was once an entry point for organizations who went on to become grant applicants in far greater numbers than we ever suspected. We are currently doing further research into what adaptations we might make to our current online speaker directory to make it more effective.

This research, which has involved many WHC stakeholders, also reaffirmed for us that people in communities throughout Wisconsin believe deeply in the same things we do, and respect and value the work of the WHC. That’s why we keep doing it, and keep striving to improve.