

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Illinois Humanities: Foreground Rural Initiative Impact Report

The Foreground Rural Initiative seeks to strengthen the civic fabric of Illinois by amplifying the voices and experiences of rural communities through the arts and humanities. By offering grants and capacity building to rural organizations, institutions, and individual practitioners of the humanities, this initiative represents a bold leap to bridge the philanthropic divide between urban centers and often overlooked small and rural communities. While 20% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color) being the fastest growing segment, these areas only receive 7% of the funding from major philanthropies.¹ This impact report reflects the evaluation of the formation and first cycle of funding of the Foreground Rural Initiative.

"There is a hunger for the humanities in rural communities."

Background

The Foreground Rural Initiative began with a lens of curiosity, humility, and deep listening with humanities practitioners and community leaders. By holding early listening sessions, forming an Advisory Committee with multiple touchpoints, and

seeking continued counsel from trusted partners from identified communities, a model of best practices has been identified for beginning any grant program. Because Illinois Humanities intentionally sought advice directly from communities, rather than assuming

knowledge and imposing a grant program onto unknown or lesser-known communities, trust was built, relationships were strengthened, and investment was mutual between rural areas and their practitioners and Illinois Humanities.

Insights from the formation of the initiative shaped evaluation inquiries:

- Strengthening existing or initiating new partnerships to bridge divides in rural communities.
- Building a “Hubs” strategy with existing clusters of humanities groups and practitioners.
- Engaging with a lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Impact & Findings

- Grantee partners formed 148 partnerships.
- 77% of grantee partner program participants identified as part of a priority community.
- Media visibility, leveraging Illinois Humanities grants for more funding, and collaborations were identified as primary levers for building and sustaining cultural infrastructure.

Partnerships

Grantee partners repeatedly expressed the incredible impact that the grants had on their ability to open dialogue, and create opportunities to gather, share history, and tell their individual and collective stories. Partnerships among arts and humanities groups and individual practitioners were a primary driver for programmatic innovation, diversified audience engagement, and more sustainable cultural infrastructure. As example, one grantee partner reported catalyzing an artists’ community in the area where none existed before. Another shifted programming to create an entire music camp after extensive outreach in the local area to gauge and garner interest.

“Hubs” Strategy

Two clusters of organizations emerged: the Western Hub west of Springfield and Peoria, and the Southern Hub situated near Carbondale, Illinois.

“Hubs” as drivers of programming and networks are a replicable model and best practice that can be reiterated within other Illinois Humanities programs and

advanced with other humanities councils and rural funders in line with growing trends toward trust-based philanthropy and centering those with authentic experience within rural communities.

Figure 1: Western Hub area (in red) and Southern Hub area (in blue).



A “Hubs” strategy amplifies existing and supports burgeoning partnerships, promotes sharing of resources, and allows individual organizations and practitioners to take risks that they could not do otherwise. As one Hubs leader stated:

I felt alone before and now I know I'm not.

Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion

Priority communities as identified by Illinois Humanities are geographically isolated, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color), immigrant, low-income, LGBTQIA+, differently-abled/disabled, and youth. The collecting of demographic data varied throughout the grant period, both by Illinois Humanities during the formation and by grantee partners for their organizational and program participation. Additionally, salient priorities communities differed from one community to the next. For instance, low-income and geographic isolation were seen overall; however, Black and Latine communities reached saliency in smaller areas.

Capacity building on data collection and equity as an important practice can help grantee partners capture more nuanced outcomes, such as:

- The arts and humanities as tools to overcome isolation and nonacceptance between different peoples and groups.
- A greater sense of identity and togetherness in rural areas.
- Bridging the gap between long-term residents and newer arrivals.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for current and future iterations of the Foreground Rural Initiative.

- Continue to seek counsel from those with direct experience by utilizing and growing the cohort of trusted rural partners and community leaders.
- Capture longitudinal data by creating benchmarks for building community and rural cultural infrastructure.
- Create and support capacity building and skills share opportunities within the Hubs.
- Build specific capacities on collecting and disaggregating demographic information to address outcomes in

tension, such as between “traditional” and emerging rural populations.

Endnotes

¹ Carlson, C., & Cook, J. (2022, December 16).

Rural America: Philanthropy's misunderstood opportunity for impact. FSG: Reimagining Social Change. <https://www.fsg.org/resource/rural-america-opportunities-for-philanthropic-partnerships/>



About Illinois Humanities

Illinois Humanities, the Illinois affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a statewide nonprofit organization that activates the humanities through free public programs, grants, and educational opportunities that foster reflection, spark conversation, build community, and strengthen civic engagement. We provide free, high-quality humanities experiences throughout Illinois, particularly for communities of color, individuals living on low incomes, counties and towns in rural areas, small arts and cultural organizations, and communities highly impacted by mass incarceration.

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