

MAINE HUMANITIES COUNCIL

Connecting people through the power and pleasure of ideas



STRATEGIC PLAN
2010—2013

To the people of Maine, our funders, and our supporters:

The Board of Directors and staff of the Maine Humanities Council are pleased to share with you our three-year strategic plan, which will guide our efforts through 2013. Underlying the plan is our commitment to enrich the lives of Maine people through literature, history, philosophy, and culture.

Ideas matter. We believe that the humanities are a powerful tool for people of all ages to better understand and interact with the world around us—whether local, national, or global. Thus, through this plan we recommit ourselves to bringing the humanities to all the people of Maine, including those with little prior exposure to them.

In developing the plan, we sought advice and comment from numerous individuals and organizations. While the information we received confirmed the importance of our mission, it also highlighted our need to reach out to additional constituencies and to communicate and deliver programs in new ways. Thus, our plan contains goals to expand our audience and develop new strategies to reach them.

We also understand the importance of continuing to collaborate closely with organizations in Maine and nationally. Over the next three years, we will strengthen our current relationships and explore opportunities for new partnerships.

As we write this plan, the nation—and Maine—is in the midst of an economic recession. It is during these times when support for the humanities becomes all the more vulnerable. At the same time, the humanities offer the multicultural competencies needed—now more than ever—to succeed in an increasingly global economy. Hence, through this plan we renew our efforts to sustain our mission over the long term.

As we move forward, we invite your ideas and suggestions. You are crucial to our efforts to make the humanities an essential aspect of life in Maine.

Sincerely,

Douglas E. Woodbury
Board Chair

Thomas K. Lizotte
Vice Chair

Erik Jorgensen
Executive Director

and:

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Chapter One—Introduction

The Maine Humanities Council (MHC), a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation, is the Maine affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). MHC promotes strong and vibrant communities by providing the people of Maine with opportunities to experience the power and pleasure of ideas.

Since its inception in 1975, MHC has been on the vanguard of advancing and safeguarding the many facets of human culture. Through the lens of literature, the arts, language, history, philosophy, religion, law, and social institutions, MHC has been a catalyst for social action and enrichment. It has pursued this mission through a variety of programs, often in partnership with other organizations.

Describing the work of MHC, Executive Director Erik Jorgensen stated: “I like to think that the Council is itself in the adventure business. We serve as ‘intellectual outfitters,’ whether the trips we organize are on the trails and byways of books, on the streets of other cultures, or simply in the sense of community that springs up each time people gather to ‘do the humanities’ in public spaces around our state.”

During the past decade, MHC has seen many changes. In 2006, longtime Executive Director Dorothy Schwartz retired, opening the door to Executive Director Erik Jorgensen, who had served as Assistant Director since 1999. This continuity in leadership has enabled MHC to maintain high standards in staff expertise and programs, and quality relationships with partners and supporters.

There also have been changes in funding. For example, in 1995, MHC received nearly all of its funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Today, MHC funding reflects a mix of donations, foundation grants, NEH funds, and program revenue. Looking ahead, factors such as a slowing economy, increased pressure on donors, and reductions in state funding will pose new challenges.

Due to these and other factors, the Board and staff agreed that the time was right to develop a new strategic plan. The intent is to strengthen the connection between the humanities and the people of Maine. In doing so, MHC will further promote the importance—indeed the essential nature—of the humanities as a powerful tool in understanding people and cultures.

The information contained in the plan does not reflect all MHC activities. Rather, it reflects priorities and new endeavors. The report below is divided into several sections. The first section describes the methodology used to develop the plan and the environment in which MHC now operates. The remainder of the report focuses on vision and mission, and goals, objectives, and benchmarks. Actions are contained in a separate *Implementation Plan*.

Chapter Two—Methodology

The Board of Directors began the strategic planning process in late 2008 by forming a Strategic Plan Advisory Committee (planning team). The team conceived the scope of work and engaged a consultant—Landry & Associates—to facilitate the process and develop the plan.

The process itself involved two primary phases. During the first phase, the planning team conducted an environmental scan. This included a review of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) by three separate groups: staff, planning team, and Board. Members of the team also conducted a series of individual interviews with selected external stakeholders, reviewed program evaluation data from several hundred participants, and examined mission statements from humanities councils nationwide. The second phase of the project involved development of new vision and mission statements and identification of priority areas. From there, goals, objectives, benchmarks, and actions were developed.

A top priority was keeping the Board and staff informed throughout the planning process and soliciting their comments and suggestions. The planning team met monthly throughout 2009, and in conjunction with these regular meetings, the Board held three sessions to discuss significant issues regarding the future. Staff met on several occasions, and both Board and staff were encouraged to offer ongoing thoughts and reactions. Overall, approximately 40 meetings were held with Board, planning team, staff, and external stakeholders. Written reports included an external stakeholders report, SWOT analysis, and updates from the planning team to the Board.

Chapter Three—Environmental Analysis

In separate sessions, the planning team, Board, and staff reviewed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. These reviews were synthesized with comments from external stakeholders to create a snapshot of the MHC environment. Below is a summary of the findings:

Strengths

The Board of Directors is made up of experienced leaders in their respective areas. Staff are dedicated, knowledgeable, and skilled. MHC has an excellent reputation as a pacesetter and is viewed as collaborative and helpful with external partners. There is a clear link between mission and programs. Several programs have achieved national recognition, including replication in other states. Despite the economic downturn, MHC has carefully shepherded its resources to ensure financial stability. Operations are housed in a facility that the Council has owned—without debt—since 2000. The location offers quick and easy access to the Maine Turnpike and to downtown Portland and, with some modifications, is considered sufficient for the foreseeable future.

Weaknesses

MHC staff is small in numbers and the organization is dependent on program-specific grants for much of its operations, thereby limiting its ability to initiate and pursue discretionary opportunities. Due to the individual grant structure, MHC staff often work separately from one another. As a result, individual staff can be closely tied to single programs and less connected to the “whole” of MHC. Also, because MHC frequently works through its partners by providing grants and expertise, the public and key stakeholders are often unaware of its contributions to the community. In terms of marketing, there is a general sense that more attention is needed in this area to address a perceived low public visibility of MHC and its programs.

Opportunities

MHC has a solid network of partners and supporters who are potential allies in expanding the audience for the humanities. Also, given the growing awareness of the importance of understanding other cultures, MHC can play a key role in helping people better understand complex issues, whether at the global, national, or state level. In terms of supporters, Maine has an increasing population of retirees who present opportunities for both fee-based programs and an expanded donor base. MHC also recognizes the need to be responsive to the increasingly diverse communities of Maine, including immigrants, refugees, and migrant workers. Another opportunity exists in the expanded use of technology, which can make accessing MHC programs quicker and easier, and which offers potential strategies for reaching people in rural areas, or those who are unable to physically attend programs. It also provides a new approach to reach young people who are accustomed to social networking and similar technology-driven activities. Technology also presents new opportunities for marketing and education. Finally, a number of partners interviewed during this process expressed interest in working more closely with MHC on shared initiatives to bring the humanities into existing venues, such as universities, churches, businesses, and nonprofit organizations.

Threats

The definition of humanities is not broadly understood. Worse, some view the subjects that comprise the humanities as intimidating or elitist. Moreover, the name of the organization—Maine Humanities Council—does not instantly connote its purpose, which creates additional marketing challenges. For some, the humanities are seen as a value-added resource rather than an essential activity. As a result, it can be challenging to compete for funding with other programs that are considered more crucial. This environment increases the sense of urgency among Board members, staff, and interested organizations to raise public understanding and appreciation of the humanities. Another concern relates to the fact that young people are not high users of MHC programs. While the long-term impact of their lower utilization is not clear, there is concern that it may weaken support for MHC over time.

Chapter Four—External Stakeholders

During the planning process, approximately 20 external stakeholders were interviewed individually to obtain their perspective of current operations and suggestions for the future. A comprehensive report was developed and shared with the Board of Directors and staff. A summary of the report is presented below.

Respected by key stakeholders

According to key stakeholders, MHC does an excellent job pursuing its mission. It is considered among the best humanities councils in the nation, known for its willingness to collaborate and explore new opportunities. MHC has a reputation for quality, fairness, and integrity. Board and staff are described as entrepreneurial, visionary, creative, helpful, agile, knowledgeable, competent, and willing to take calculated risks to advance the MHC mission.

Programs are inventive and reflect broad constituencies

Stakeholders are impressed with programs—such as *Winter Weekend* and *New Books, New Readers*—that appeal to a wide range of constituencies. Several commented on the value of continuing community outreach programs such as *Born to Read*. Interviewed stakeholders associated the humanities most often with literature and art, and only secondarily with culture, community, dialogue, ideas, history, fine arts, philosophy, and moral questions. This suggests that even within a core constituency, more needs to be done to explain the true range of the humanities.

Increase visibility of MHC and the humanities, and continue development efforts

Increasing visibility and public awareness was a consistent theme. The absence of a broad understanding of the nature and importance of the humanities was mentioned as a potential threat to all humanities programs. Thus, stakeholders emphasized the need to convey the relevancy of the humanities to current issues. Also, several stakeholders suggested that Board and staff should continue their efforts to improve fundraising capacity, and maintain their visibility in state, regional, and national philanthropic communities.

Continue to collaborate

MHC is seen as a collaborative, trusted partner. Stakeholders suggested that MHC build on this strength as a crosscutting strategy for program development, fundraising, and marketing. Several expressed the importance of continuing to maintain excellent relationships with national partners.

Broaden the audience

Most stakeholders interviewed believe that it is important for MHC to seek out new audiences. Most mentioned the importance of engaging more young people. And several commented on the importance of going where the “underserved are.” Finding ways to interact with people in existing venues—such as in schools, business groups, or churches—was a consistent theme.

Expand use of technology

Expanding the use of technology was mentioned frequently as a tool for broadening and engaging the audience. For example, one stakeholder suggested expanding MHC workshops with follow-up online discussion groups. Another stakeholder suggested that MHC explore social networking as a strategy to engage young people.

Chapter Five—Vision and Mission

With the benefit of discussions with Board, staff, and external stakeholders, the planning team revised the MHC vision and mission statements. While not radical departures from their predecessors, the statements below do sharpen the focus on MHC priorities.

Vision

Connecting people through the power and pleasure of ideas.

Mission

The Maine Humanities Council—a statewide nonprofit organization—enriches the lives of people in Maine through literature, history, philosophy, and culture. Our programs, events, grants, and online resources encourage critical thinking and conversation across social, economic, and cultural boundaries

Chapter Six—Goals, Objectives, and Benchmarks

In keeping with our mission, we have established four overarching goals and 15 objectives to be monitored over the next three years. Specific actions to achieve the goals are contained in a separate and detailed *Implementation Plan*. Our four goals are:

- Expand the Audience for the Humanities
- Continue the MHC Tradition of Excellence in Programs
- Improve Organizational Sustainability
- Ensure Effective and Efficient Operations



Goal I—Expand the Audience for the Humanities

We strive for an **enthusiastic, broad, and diverse audience of all ages**. Thus, during the next three years, we will develop new ideas and strategies to bring the humanities to more people in our state. In particular, in addition to maintaining our current constituencies, we will seek new ways to reach young adults and multicultural audiences. However, it should be noted that maintaining current programs—and funding levels—will, in some instances, require substantial perseverance and creativity. During the next three years, MHC will devote particular attention to:

- A. **People with little prior exposure to the humanities.** Through community outreach programs—such as *New Books, New Readers*—we will continue to reach out to groups outside the humanities mainstream. We will maintain program participation in this area at fiscal year (FY) 2010 levels, and we will seek new funding for specific groups.
- B. **Young adults between the ages of 25 and 40.** Many young adults have little opportunity to connect with the humanities after high school or college, and most are not aware of MHC resources. We will develop new strategies to reach them.
- C. **People from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.** The increasing diversity of Maine people is both an opportunity to enrich MHC with new interactions and perspectives, and a potential challenge in terms of outreach and program content. To increase the diversity of participation, we will explore new outreach strategies and/or new program content.
- D. **Current core constituencies.** Many in this group—in particular adults over the age of 55—are loyal and return participants at programs and events. We remain committed to developing and delivering programs for this group.
- E. **Teachers and their students.** As our principal strategy to reach children, we are committed to seeking opportunities to support our teacher programs.
- F. **Rural audiences.** To maintain our enthusiastic commitment to rural Maine, we will seek new strategies to continue to provide offerings in these areas.

- Goal I Benchmarks -

1. Maintain a minimum of FY 2010 program levels for community outreach programs.
2. By January 2011, adopt strategy to increase participants between the ages of 25 and 40.
3. By June 2011, evaluate data that reveals the current level of diversity of program participation, and adopt strategies to increase diversity consistent with state and regional census data on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.
4. Annually maintain at least FY 2010 participation levels for adults over the age of 55.
5. Annually maintain at least FY 2010 participation levels for teachers.
6. Annually maintain at least FY 2010 participation levels for rural audiences.

Goal II – Continue the MHC Tradition of Excellence in Programs

We will continue our tradition of **excellence, innovation, scholarship, and relevance** with programs such as *Literature & Medicine*; *The Many Lives of Zora Neale Hurston*; *Humanities on Demand* podcasts; *Winter Weekends*; and *New Books, New Readers*; and through grant making to other organizations. Our focus will remain in the areas of literature, history, philosophy, and culture. Timely topics will be explored that offer opportunities to sharpen critical thinking. Our principal objective in this area relates to:

- A. **Program evaluation.** We will implement a comprehensive program evaluation process that will enable us to improve offerings more systematically and achieve our goal of expanding the audience for the humanities as described in Goal I. We will incorporate greater use of metrics; participant satisfaction and demographics; comparisons to other activities that compete for the attention of our constituents; and more systematic use of program excellence indicators. We will integrate our findings into continuous improvement strategies.

- Goal II Benchmarks -

1. By June 2010, adopt general Program Excellence Indicators.
2. By June 2011, complete evaluation elements for all programs.
3. By November 2011, Program Committee will submit to the Board an annual program evaluation report, including recommendations.

Goal III—Improve Organizational Sustainability

We will improve our capacity to respond to new opportunities and challenges through **sufficient financial reserves, broad and deep community recognition and support, strong institutional partnerships, and effective government relations**. To achieve this goal, we will concentrate our efforts in the following areas:

- A. **Marketing.** By June 2011 we will launch a robust marketing program to increase both audience and donor support. Consideration will be given to a redesigned website, print materials, social networking tools, and stronger media relations.
- B. **Development.** We will deepen and expand the development program, with special attention to the major donor base, relationships with grant funders, Board participation, and investigation of special event possibilities. By 2012, we will reach an aggregate individual giving level of \$95,000 per year and hold one special event annually with emphasis on planned giving society members.
- C. **Leadership and advocacy.** We will increase our visibility as the leader in promoting the humanities in Maine, and—in conjunction with others—raise the MHC regional and

national profile. Our staff and Board will meet periodically with key leaders in education, business, public policy, nonprofit sectors, and government.

- D. **Collaboration.** We will continue to build our reputation as a multifaceted partner. To do so, we will increase and strengthen reciprocal institutional relationships with educational institutions, state agencies, nonprofits, foundations, disenfranchised communities, and others—both in-state and out-of-state—for the purpose of program development, information sharing, and resource development.
- E. **Technology.** Technology capacity is fundamental to all aspects of our work—including operations, program delivery, outreach, and marketing. We will form a Technology Team to prioritize needs and develop a technology plan to include improvement of our database and the exchange server.

- Goal III Benchmarks -

1. By November 2010, approve marketing plan.
2. Raise \$85,000 in FY 2010; \$90,000 in FY 2011; and \$95,000 in FY 2012.
3. Maintain grant level of \$150,000 for FY 2010, FY 2011, and FY 2012, excluding grants from the U.S. Department of Education and National Endowment for the Humanities.
4. Leadership and Advocacy: Annually report key contacts and meetings.
5. Collaboration: Annually report key contacts and outcomes.
6. By September 2010, complete technology research and make recommendations on new database and exchange server.

Goal IV—Ensure Effective and Efficient Operations

We will ensure effective, efficient, and modern operations. This includes governance by a **well-informed, diverse, and active Board of Directors**; and management by **staff who are considered leaders in the field**. We will promote the well-being of employees, reward effort fairly, and strive for continuous improvement in management functions. Our areas of emphasis during the next three years are:

- A. **Governance.** We will strengthen Board capacity through commitment to mentorship for new Board members, professional development opportunities, and commitment to active participation of individual Board members. Recruitment of new Board members will be rigorous and thorough, and will reflect our strategic goals.
- B. **Staff development.** We are committed to staff development and performance review, including the incorporation of individual development objectives, and evaluation of our performance appraisal process.
- C. **Facility.** We will seek ways to improve our buildings and grounds, with emphasis on energy efficiency and, in particular, investigation of the feasibility of installing solar panels and energy efficient windows.

- Goal IV **Benchmarks** -

1. By December 2011 and each year thereafter, 60 percent of Board will participate in at least one Board training activity.
2. By December 2010 and each year thereafter, 100 percent of Board will make a financial contribution to MHC.
3. By June 2011 and each year thereafter, 100 percent of Board will make one external contact on behalf of MHC annually.
4. By June 2010, 100 percent of Board will participate on Board Committees.
5. At least every two years, Board members will attend one MHC program.
6. By July 2011 and each year thereafter, staff will participate in at least one professional development opportunity annually.
7. By January 2011, implement performance review changes.

Chapter Seven—Conclusion

Through this strategic plan, MHC renews its efforts to bring the humanities to all the people of Maine. We believe that the humanities are vital to an informed and thriving citizenry. Particularly in this time of emerging global relationships, the humanities are fundamental to understanding the history and motivations of cultures near and far.

In conducting the research for this plan, we learned that MHC is well respected by its state and national partners for programs that are considered effective and, in some instances, groundbreaking. Feedback from program participants reveals that our programs are well received by the general public.

We also learned that there is consensus that MHC should broaden its audience, with particular attention to young adults and to the increasingly diverse populations of Maine. In so doing, we remain committed to existing constituencies and programs.

To modernize our operations, we will expand our use of technology to work more efficiently, and to better reach and connect people across the 30,000 square miles of Maine. In so doing, we will take care not to erode our traditional approach of bringing people together through face-to-face discussion.

While MHC is sound and well managed, sustaining our capacity will require a concerted effort. This includes working with others in seeking new strategies to demystify the humanities and anchor them into the public consciousness. It means widening the base of supporters who share our commitment. And, it means finding more effective ways to get our message heard.

In developing this plan, we reconfirmed our belief in the importance of the MHC mission, and our enthusiasm for achieving it. We learned that our national partners, program partners, donors, and supporters share our commitment. In the coming years, we look forward to strengthening these relationships and expanding the circle as we work together to connect people through the power and pleasure of ideas