

# We're Listening: Fall 2025



In fall 2025, WI Humanities brought together cultural leaders in communities large and small throughout the state, and virtually. Librarians, poets, artists, local historians, city planners, scholars, civic leaders, teachers, and more came together at WH Listening Sessions. We learned so much about the strengths and challenges that shape their community-building work and visions today.

While Wisconsin communities are constantly changing, one overarching takeaway with special significance for WH and for our statewide partners was this:

Local leaders want more opportunities to connect with each other to reflect on their communities. When they do, it can strengthen their existing community-building projects and generate fresh ideas. That's exactly what happened at the WH Listening Sessions.



But without WH bringing them together, local cultural and civic leaders have difficulty building lasting networks—networks that enable them to share ideas and collaborate to serve their communities.

We are working hard to figure out how WH can do more for the critical cultural infrastructure of Wisconsin by being that civic connector and resource for the state.

## What big themes came out of the sessions?

### We heard you champion similar strengths.

➤ **Wisconsinites are doers!** When we want to get something done, we search out the people we need and roll up our sleeves. We enjoy reciprocity and the accessibility of people who in other places might be “too high on a perch!” City councils, nonprofits, schools, and libraries are full of people with a “let’s try” attitude who are nimble and open to new ideas. People speak up and communities are better because of that civic engagement.

➤ **We’re gorgeous!** That’s right. People in urban and rural areas alike value and advocate for our waters, our historic architecture, our bike and walking paths, our parks, prairies, forests and gardens, the beautification of front yards, and, of course, our wildlife. Indigenous place-based knowledge about the land and water is a strength. But at least some of us kind of want all that gorgeousness to be kept a local secret to protect it!

➤ **Our rich multiplicity and generosity strengthen us.** People celebrate all their fellow community members with different characteristics, beliefs, experiences, interests, and viewpoints who care for their communities and make them strong. Volunteers who make cultural nonprofit organizations hum are priceless. People spoke of uplifting the wisdom of elders and welcoming newcomers. They support each other’s cultural festivals, arts traditions, cultural foods and music. They see culture as central to mental health and belonging. Wisconsin is rich in cultural centers, heritage crafts and festivals, community theatre, vibrant libraries and public art. These make Wisconsin neighborhoods and towns livable. Awards are handed out for “livability,” but participants asked if the message is loud and clear to decision-makers that the arts and humanities are at the core of it?

➤ **We work together.** Practitioners at these sessions sing the praises of existing collaborations that support them professionally and in everyday life. And they want more collaborations with local and statewide organizations like Wisconsin Humanities.



## We heard opportunities within challenges

➤ **Young people are needed and have a lot to give.** Nonprofits are in dire need of a younger generation of volunteers. There is untapped potential in youth who are hungry for leadership roles in the humanities and who can act as “positive pinballs” in their communities. There is power in bringing older and younger generations together to share stories, build camaraderie, and act together. A wish for new and stronger connections between K-12 schools and local humanities nonprofits was voiced often.

➤ **Social and economic challenges have increased but new tools and partners are emerging.** Community members and nonprofits are stepping up, using humanities tools to address critical challenges like economic instability, housing and food insecurity, and access to affordable healthcare and childcare. Authentic partnering is key in addressing these, but training in how to use the humanities to succeed is sometimes needed.

➤ **Funding is precarious;** new challenges are prompting new ways of thinking about funders. Nonprofits report less financial support for the arts and humanities sector due to recent cuts, such as Wisconsin Humanities experienced. The very recent loss of local colleges, elementary schools, hospitals, and local historical societies was mourned. Nonprofit leaders are re-imagining ways to meet and talk with funders, possibly together.

➤ **Technology and market forces threaten to undermine the value we bring.** We’re in an attention-shortening economy and can’t see what is coming with AI and more. Participants are wrestling with how the humanities avoid dissolving into marketing fluff or being just another quickly consumed product.

➤ **Population growth has multiple effects.** Many communities saw surprising population increases due to post-pandemic work changes and industry booms. Libraries and local governments are struggling to keep up with increased demand for services.

## What do participants want from Wisconsin Humanities now?

### Participants told us...

They see and trust Wisconsin Humanities as one of the only organizations that can convene humanities stakeholders and assist in sparking new relationships, reducing siloes, and maximizing strengths.



Wisconsin Humanities can help decision-makers and the broader public understand the impact of public humanities work and increase recognition of the varied ways organizations use the public humanities to create healthier communities and stronger democratic fabric.

WH's Community Powered community resilience training program and our grantmaking are extremely valuable and participants are keen to see them return.

Attendees were enthusiastic about holding more than one session and finding a way to convene again.

## We listened, and now we're moving forward!

What we heard has us eager to play a new and larger role as a statewide resource and convener for individuals and organizations who use culture, conversation, and storytelling to connect and energize our communities, building on our state's incredible assets to meet the challenges we face.

Wisconsin Humanities is at a critical moment as we work to rebuild after federal defunding. We are so grateful to all the people who took the time to share their stories and hopes with us. We've been here for you for over fifty years and hope to be here for many more, enriching Wisconsin life together.

### **Fall 2025 Sessions:**

- 9/30/2025 Virtual Listening Session for WH supporters statewide
- 10/21/2025 Superior Listening Session at Superior Public Library
- 10/22/2025 Spooner Area Listening Session at Spooner Memorial Library
- 10/28/2025 Milwaukee Listening Session at Arts At Large
- 11/07/2025 Eau Claire and Chippewa Valley Listening Session at L.E. Phillips Memorial Public Library
- 11/11/2025 Green Bay Listening Session at Brown County Library
- 11/14/2025 Virtual Session for Rural Libraries, with WI Arts Board

