

# GEO Member Story



***How the Pennsylvania Humanities Council drove its recent strategic redirection to reexamine and change its practices by engaging its grantees and the communities it serves.***

One of 56 state humanities councils, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council is a statewide organization dedicated to promoting the humanities. Since 1973, PHC has worked to support local groups — from libraries to museums to theaters — in communities across Pennsylvania, from the biggest cities to the smallest towns.

But in 2013, PHC undertook a strategic redirection to radically change its focus. Historically, the organization offered small, transactional support to directly support humanities programs. Recently it realized it could bring the humanities to bear on social issues. Today, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council works to use the arts and humanities as a way to address essential education and civic engagement challenges in Pennsylvania. A change of this magnitude significantly affected the organization's grant portfolio and its grantmaking practices. "We used to fund traditional arts and culture programs and we did very transactional grantmaking. As part of the change, we're giving much larger grants," said R. Mimi Iijima, director of programs and special projects at PHC. And in an effort to acknowledge the needs of its grantees, many of the grants offered by PHC are not just larger but are now also unrestricted.

This redirection was influenced by the continuous decline in access to public funding for the humanities. By fostering a culture of learning and improvement through its history, PHC was able to take this as an opportunity to use finite resources to make a larger impact. "Part of our learning culture is an effort to improve. I think that's pretty much essential to what we do and we're constantly trying to do our work better and more thoughtfully," Iijima said. Though the decision ultimately lay with the Board of Directors of PHC, they found success by ensuring they did not design this redirection in a vacuum. For instance, grantees were brought in for honest and in-depth conversations about what this change would look like *in practice*, both providing PHC with critical information and assuring grantees that there wouldn't be negative repercussions to this change.

In practice, this redirection to link the humanities to broader community issues has given the Pennsylvania Humanities Council an opportunity to experiment with new approaches to its work — like the practices championed by the GEO community — many of which have helped to make the organization and its grantees more effective and impactful in their approaches. For instance, PHC has had to give up some control in its work to those experts with more experience. "Sometimes it's scary to give control up, but it's been very helpful. People will bring up issues we haven't thought of, and it helps us empathize with our partners and the struggles they're going through so we're able to integrate that into the work we do," Iijima said.

This approach was particularly evident — and beneficial — in how PHC launched and runs its Teen Reading Lounge. By partnering with local public libraries to run book discussion programs, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council promotes reading and literacy among teen audiences. However,

instead of designing one program that all of its partners must adhere to, the organization instead lets its public library partners design and run the programs. PHC has seen incredible success by allowing local experts (library staff and teen participants) to design and execute the programs on community-by-community basis.

As the Pennsylvania Humanities Council tries many new things, it's been critically important that it takes every opportunity it can to learn about the effectiveness of its programs. But much like its decision-making, PHC has taken this as an opportunity to engage its grantees as "robust partners." "We try to acknowledge the fact that people have expertise and knowledge and perspectives that we don't have. Part of our transition has been to get feedback from our grantees," Iijima said.

This focus on learning isn't an unfunded mandate for PHC's grantees either; it treats its commitment to learning for improvement as part of its role as much as it is for its grantees. "We try to be very open about what outcomes we want to achieve — we need to be very clear and upfront *and* provide support so our grantees can evaluate their programs. We try to work collaboratively to find ways for us to learn together, and we want grantees to help us fine-tune programs. We're working with an evaluator right now to spend more time directly with our grantees and to develop tools that our grantees can use so it's less labor intensive for them," Iijima said. Learning can be onerous for grantees, but PHC has taken steps to ensure that it supports its grantees in their evaluation work.

One of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council's latest endeavors is a community engagement pilot program in partnership with the Orton Family Foundation. This program is the first statewide pilot implementation of Orton's Community Heart and Soul™ initiative. Building on the principles outlined by the Orton Family Foundation, this collaborative will seek to engage and inspire residents in communities around Pennsylvania to take action and make a difference in their communities. As PHC continues to broaden its focus to further engage its communities, this program provides an opportunity for the organization to highlight and support those already on the ground working to improve their own communities.

By engaging its grantees — and the leaders and residents of the communities it serves — in open and honest conversations about its work, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council has been able to turn a negative economic forecast into an opportunity to grow its impact. "It can be scary, but if you're a really thoughtful partner and are careful to pick thoughtful partners, it isn't. That's the joy of partnership," Iijima said.

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To find out more information on the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, please visit <http://www.pahumanities.org/>.

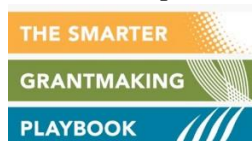
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## **GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight**

*[Do Nothing About Me Without Me](#)*



*[The Smarter Grantmaking Playbook: Strengthen Relationships with Grantees](#)*



*[Widespread Empathy](#)*

