

State of the Humanities MKE

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Introduction

The State of the Humanities MKE was a panel discussion hosted by the Center for 21st Century Studies at UW-Milwaukee that examined how Milwaukee's institutions, organizations, and communities can sustain, expand, and care for the humanities in a moment of political, financial, and cultural uncertainty.

Moderated by C21 Director Jennifer Johung, the panel brought together four Milwaukee-based humanities leaders, Michael Carriere (MSOE), Art Derse (MCW), Jodi Eastberg (MIAD), and Maggie Nettlesheim Hoffmann (Marquette), whose work spans higher education, the arts, and public-facing humanities initiatives.

The panel centered on several guiding questions: What is at stake for the humanities in Milwaukee right now? What forms of humanities work are we fighting to



sustain, reimagine, or rebuild? And what does meaningful care for the humanities look like in a local, collective context?

Following the panel, attendees participated in facilitated breakout room discussions that expanded on the panel's themes and were invited to complete a post-event audience survey. The seven insights presented in this booklet synthesize key takeaways from the main panel discussion, breakout discussions, and survey responses.

Together, they offer a grounded assessment of the current state of the humanities in Milwaukee and the directions they may need to move next.

A recording of this panel discussion can be found here: <https://shorturl.at/cpla6>

Overview

The humanities are not dying; their current systems are.

The humanities are essential for survival, joy, and collective meaning, not just economic outcomes.

Universities must give up ownership, not just extend access, if the humanities are to remain relevant.

The current crisis facing the humanities is political.

The future of the humanities is local, community-based, and collaborative.

Sustainability requires collective action, new funding models, and care for labor.

The humanities are not dying; their current systems are.

Across the panel, breakout rooms, and survey responses, participants consistently rejected the narrative that the humanities are disappearing. Instead, they argued that what is failing are the institutional systems that currently house and regulate humanities work. Panelists emphasized that enrollments remain strong and that people continue to seek meaning, context, and connection, clear evidence that the humanities themselves are resilient. Breakout participants, particularly graduate students and community practitioners, echoed this sentiment but were more critical of academic gatekeeping and siloed structures that make the humanities appear irrelevant or inaccessible. Survey respondents reinforced this view by highlighting the many visible and invisible ways humanities thrive outside universities, including community storytelling, popular culture, and nonprofit work. Together, these perspectives suggest that the crisis is not one of relevance or demand, but of outdated infrastructures that no longer match how people actually practice and experience the humanities.

The current crisis facing the humanities is political.

Panelists framed recent federal cuts to agencies such as the NEH, IMLS, and Title VI programs as part of a broader political assault on free inquiry, cultural memory, and public knowledge. This framing resonated across breakout rooms, where participants named curriculum policing, censorship, and cultural erasure as signals of authoritarian anxiety rather than neutral budgetary decisions. Survey respondents

similarly recognized that funding instability and institutional precarity are shaped by political priorities, not declining public interest. While panelists often focused on advocacy within existing systems, breakout participants, especially younger scholars and creatives, expressed skepticism that institutions alone can be persuaded to reverse course. This generational tension underscores a shared diagnosis of the problem, even as it reveals disagreement about whether reform or rupture is the more viable response.

The humanities are essential for survival, joy, and collective meaning, not just economic outcomes.

A major point of convergence across all sources was the rejection of narrow, market-based justifications for the humanities. Panelists described humanistic work as central to emotional survival, dignity, imagination, and community cohesion. Breakout participants agreed, noting that crisis-driven rhetoric and constant demands for economic proof undermine the very values that draw people to the humanities. Instead, both groups emphasized joy, meaning, and connection as the humanities' true strength. Survey respondents reinforced this framing, frequently citing the panel's insistence that the humanities help people make sense of rapid change and social instability. This shared perspective calls for a reframing of humanities advocacy that centers human need and lived experience rather than employability metrics alone.

The future of the humanities is local, community-based, and collaborative.

Milwaukee emerged throughout the conversation as a city rich with cultural “pollinators” such as artists, educators, organizers, and storytellers who sustain vibrant humanities ecosystems despite limited resources. Panelists highlighted the city’s potential for cross-sector collaboration and argued that sustainable futures for the humanities will be rooted in local needs rather than abstract institutional priorities. Breakout participants pushed this further, stressing that universities have historically engaged in extractive relationships with communities and must now move toward genuinely reciprocal partnerships. Survey respondents strongly supported this direction, calling for coalitions among universities, nonprofits, cultural institutions, and community groups, as well as shared platforms that make humanities work across the city more visible. Across all sources, collaboration was framed not as optional enrichment but as essential infrastructure.

Universities must give up ownership, not just extend access, if the humanities are to remain relevant.

Questions of power and belonging surfaced repeatedly in breakout discussions and survey responses. While panelists emphasized that humanities thrive even in institutions without formal humanities majors, breakout participants challenged the idea that universities should

define what “counts” as humanities work. Participants asked pointedly that if the humanities truly belong to everyone, why are they so often locked behind academic credentials, paywalls, and institutional hierarchies? Survey respondents echoed the need for broader representation, calling for the inclusion of students, early-career scholars, non-academic humanists, and community-based practitioners in future conversations. This takeaway signals a shift from expanding institutional reach to redistributing authority, recognizing that communities do not need universities to practice the humanities, but universities need communities to remain credible.

Sustainability requires collective action, new funding models, and care for labor.

Panelists outlined potential paths forward through regional cooperation, philanthropy, unified funding pools, and long-term planning for grant-funded labor. Breakout participants were more blunt, describing the current moment as one that may require radical alternatives to traditional government and institutional partnerships. Survey respondents aligned closely with both views, emphasizing invisible labor, burnout, and the need for shared responsibility when public funding fails. Across sources, sustainability was framed not simply as financial solvency but as continuity, care, and accountability, especially for graduate students, staff, and community partners whose labor often underwrites humanities work without adequate protection.

Conclusion

Taken together, the panel, breakout discussions, and survey responses paint a clear picture: the humanities are alive, necessary, and already evolving, but they cannot thrive within systems that no longer serve their practitioners or publics. The most consistent call to action is collective rather than institutional. Participants across all venues urged movement beyond conversation toward coordinated collaboration, shared infrastructure, and redistributive partnerships that reflect how humanities work actually happens today.

As many respondents noted, C21 is uniquely positioned to act as a convener in this next phase, hosting follow-up events, forming working groups, spotlighting non-traditional projects, and building bridges among universities, community organizations, and independent humanists. More broadly, the challenge issued by this event encourages institutions to let go of ownership, to center joy and meaning over crisis rhetoric, and to co-create the next version of the humanities with the communities who have been sustaining them all along.

