



Wingspan Learning Community Evaluation *Summary*

Wingspan Evaluation Summary

Wingspan is a grant program launched as part of PA Humanities' 50th anniversary. It supported 24 small- and mid-sized humanities and cultural organizations across Pennsylvania.

The program was designed to help organizations recover and grow after the pandemic. Each grantee received \$50,000-\$100,000 over two years, with flexible funding that could support programs, staff development, operations, or other organizational needs. Funding was provided by Spring Point Partners and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

Wingspan also created a Learning Community where leaders could connect, share ideas, and learn from one another. Organizations from rural and urban communities met regularly—twelve (12) times virtually and once for a two-day in-person learning exchange—to share experiences, discuss challenges, and build relationships.

The program drew on ideas from adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* book and theory, which emphasizes adaptability, collaboration, and learning together. PA Humanities served as a connector, helping seasoned and emerging humanities leaders build relationships across urban and rural regions and learn from one another.

Purpose of the Evaluation

To better understand the impact of the learning community on leadership development, reduction in isolation and humanities and community engagement practices, PA Humanities partnered with McClanahan Associates, Inc. (MAI) and ImpactED out of the University of Pennsylvania to evaluate the project. The goal was to understand participants' experiences in the learning activities to understand how it impacted participants' growth. In addition, the evaluation explored how the program supported collaboration among organizations, knowledge sharing, and new approaches to the humanities and community work.

Launched in February 2024, the evaluation used surveys, 1-1 conversations, and focus groups to gather feedback. It was designed not only to assess the program but also to help PA Humanities strengthen future versions of programs like Wingspan that combined grantmaking, networking and capacity building.

Key Insights

- 1. Flexible funding helped organizations recover and grow.** Wingspan's flexible grants allowed leaders to focus on what their organizations needed most, whether launching new programs, stabilizing operations, or investing in staff. The flexibility made it possible for grantees to think bigger and plan for the future. Participants said the funding helped them to invest in new ideas, plan more strategically, relieve financial pressure, and support staff and organizational growth. Early in the program, some grantees were unsure how flexible the funding truly was due to past experiences with restrictive grants. This feedback helped PA Humanities clarify expectations and reinforce a trust-based approach to funding.
- 2. Peer connections created a statewide network of support.** The Learning Community helped leaders build meaningful relationships with peers across Pennsylvania - particularly among rural and urban leaders - creating a trusted network for sharing experiences, best practices and resources. Participants consistently described the peer network as one of the most valuable parts of the program. Self-directed small group discussions were especially effective in creating space for deeper connections, targeted conversations and shared problem-solving. Many participants said the connections they built through Wingspan will continue well beyond the program.
- 3. Peer learning strengthened leadership confidence.** Through workshops, conversations, and reflection, participants reported feeling more confident in their leadership roles and more willing to experiment with new ideas. Many leaders said the experience helped them think more creatively and strategically about the future - and encouraged them to be more in tune with staff and board. Participants also valued the opportunity to reflect on well-being and sustainability in leadership—topics that are often overlooked but critical for nonprofit leaders.
- 4. The program sparked new ideas inside organizations.** Participants brought practical insights and inspiration from the Learning Community back to their teams. Leaders said the program encouraged them to strengthen community engagement, create more welcoming spaces, and share resources more openly within their organizations. In many cases, these ideas led to tangible changes in how organizations approach their humanities and cultural work.
- 5. Emergent Strategy principles reinforced collaboration and adaptability.** Participants engaged with the ideas found in the book and philosophy of adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* in different ways. Some explored the concepts deeply, while others focused more on leadership skills. Many leaders said the ideas around adaptability ("be like water") and relationships ("small is a reflection of all") will continue to shape their work moving forward. Across cohorts, the approach reinforced the importance of collaboration, flexibility, and relationship-building, values that align closely with community-centered humanities work.

Recommendations for the Future

Based on participant feedback, several opportunities could strengthen future iterations of Wingspan.

1. **Relationship-building was one of Wingspan's greatest strengths.** Future programs should continue to include in-person gatherings, site visits, and small-group discussions that foster trust and meaningful engagement. In fact, the cohort expressed an interest in more in-person gatherings so that relationships could be built across regional divides.
2. **Expand leadership and skill-building opportunities.** Participants valued workshops on nonprofit leadership topics such as budgeting, governance, and management. Continuing to offer training and peer-learning opportunities will help leaders strengthen their skills and learn from one another. This is often something leaders need to seek out and pay for, and having this opportunity provided within the grant program was invaluable.
3. **Support collaboration and collective impact.** Future programs could create more opportunities for participants to work together and strengthen their collective voice. This could include conversations with funders, training on advocacy and policy engagement, and opportunities for connection across cohorts. Grantees also mentioned wanting more support for peer site visits - visiting each other and seeing the work in person could spark new ideas and collaborations.

Conclusion

The Wingspan Learning Community created space for growth, connection, and shared learning among humanities and cultural leaders across Pennsylvania.

Participants developed new skills, built lasting relationships, and explored fresh ideas for their organizations and communities. The program also demonstrated the power of trust-based funding and peer learning to support nonprofit leaders.

By building on these lessons - and applying key takeaways and recommendations to shape innovative programs like Wingspan - PA Humanities can continue to strengthen its leadership across the state, connecting humanities and cultural practitioners, supporting their growth and work, and expanding capacity for community-centered humanities programs.

Read more stories about the impact and outcomes of Wingspan on our website at www.pahumanities.org. You can explore our full Wingspan Evaluation Report upon request by emailing programs@pahumanities.org.



PA Humanities is an independent nonprofit partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and part of a network of 56 state humanities councils across the country. Its mission is to champion the humanities as a means to spark civic engagement, build community, educate, and inspire.