



Deteriorating civic life in America poses many risks to participatory democracy. Significant books and reports document inequities in civic education, decreases in rates of voting, political polarization, declining involvement in civic associations and trust in civic institutions, and threats to local journalism.

The *Culture Is Key* report focuses on the potential to help renew civic life through the practices of cultural organizations in communities. If democracy depends on citizen connectedness and understanding, as most civic policy positions claim, then more attention should be paid to the collective contributions that cultural organizations make to these connections and understandings in the communities they serve.

The *Culture Is Key* report summarizes and analyzes an 18-month inquiry into connections between civic health — as defined by community participation and community well-being — and the public activities of nonprofit cultural organizations. In working with pilot project teams, soliciting survey responses, and conducting in-depth interviews, the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities' goal has been to connect what cultural organizations *already* do to existing indicators of civic health. Five key themes and potential next steps emerged.

1. IMPACT: Cultural organizations make a positive impact on Rhode Island's civic health through their public-facing activities.

» NEXT STEP: Identifying, strengthening, and evaluating these impacts—efforts to which this report seeks to contribute—would make this work more visible and better resourced.

2. SUSTAINED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: To strengthen civic health, cultural organizations must genuinely invite and sustain engagement with their local communities.

» NEXT STEP: Support and amplify cultural organizations' existing community-engaged practices, and provide resources for cultural organizations seeking to strengthen their community engagement.

3. SHARED COMMITMENT WITH JOURNALISTS: Cultural organizations and journalists have a shared commitment to supporting informed and dynamic community discourses, but this potential is in large part unrealized in Rhode Island.

» NEXT STEP: Nurture the natural points of collaboration between journalists and cultural organizations around community storytelling, as well as shared work on clarifying and focusing dialogues, and correcting misinformation and broadening perspectives.

4. SECTOR-WIDE CHALLENGES: Cultural organizations face challenges to focusing on civic health as a result of institutional cultures that don't support this work; limited financial resources; and limited staff capacity.

» NEXT STEP: A shared framework that includes indicators of civic health and measurable outcomes could create positive, tangible demonstrations of impact and platforms for advocacy.

5. PARTNERSHIP: By working in partnership with one another and outside the sector, cultural organizations can share resources, generate new perspectives and ideas, and positively affect civic health in their communities. However, working in partnership requires time, energy, and resources dedicated to shared visioning and coordination.

» NEXT STEP: Developing a shared sector-wide understanding of civic health impact, as well as greater incentives and resources dedicated towards supporting partnerships, can facilitate partnerships that directly strengthen civic health.

The *Culture Is Key* report includes a discussion of:

- how the team conceptualized the connection between civic health and cultural organizations;
- an overview of the components of the project;
- a summary and analysis of the survey and interviews with a broad group of cultural organizations;
- a synthesis of the activities, outcomes, and perspectives of the pilot project teams;
- as well as several appendices with more information.

Our hope is that you will recognize the value of the cultural experiences you have had through organizations in your community, and be inspired to contribute to the renewal of civil society through culture, humanities, and arts.


Nearly 100 people participated in *Culture Is Key*, including:



- 69 people representing different cultural organizations throughout the state
- 9 Advisory Committee members
- 9 Journalists
- 10 Humanities Council staffers, including the initiative's Civic Health Fellow; the Council's Executive Director and Associate Director of Grants and Strategic Initiatives; and a Research Consultant who conducted surveys and interviews.

The Humanities Council is grateful for the support of the Rhode Island Foundation as well as the *Democracy and the Informed Citizen* Initiative of the Federation of State Humanities Councils and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.



 To view the full *Culture is Key* report, please visit our website at rihumanities.org.