



Mass Humanities
Request for Proposal (RFP)
Evaluation of *Expand Massachusetts Stories* Grantmaking Program

Issued by:

Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities
Katherine Stevens, Director of Grants and Programs
66 Bridge Street, Northampton MA 01560
(413) 203-6242
kstevens@masshumanities.org
www.masshumanities.org

Date Issued: February 15, 2025

Regular based on questions received in FAQ

1. Overview

Mass Humanities is seeking proposals from qualified evaluators to conduct an evaluation of our *Expand Massachusetts Stories* grantmaking initiative, to determine its effectiveness, outcomes, and overall performance in furthering the organization's goals and mission.

This evaluation project will offer insight into the results of newly implemented strategies and subsequent work over the past three years. It will also inform future program improvements, help in making data-driven decisions, bolster case-making to our legislator and donor audiences, and it will form the basis of a broader report on the public humanities field and our own evolution within it.

The duration of the contract will be 12 months, beginning in April 2025. The contract compensation is \$40,000, sponsored through a grant from the Barr Foundation. The work can be carried out remotely and asynchronously. Periodic internal meetings during business hours (9am-5pm EST) and some in-person evaluation sessions will be defined in the initial planning period of the contract.

The evaluator will be supported by Mass Humanities' Director of Grants and Programs, Katherine Stevens, as well as a project team dedicated to the success of the contract. Katherine will provide documents to review and help with any needs around communication and meeting scheduling with various stakeholders.

2. Organization Structure & Programs

Mass Humanities is one of fifty-four state and territorial humanities councils serving as local affiliates of the National Endowment for the Humanities. We partner with non-profit organizations to bring history, philosophy, and literature into the everyday lives of people in communities across the Commonwealth. We believe the humanities are the cornerstones of our democracy, the tools with which we comprehend the past, forge innovative ideas, and express ourselves as participants in a free society.

Since 1974, we have provided millions of dollars in direct funding for programs that bring people together to learn, share their stories, and imagine a better future. In 2023, we awarded \$2.3M in total grants to 125 organizations.

We are funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Barr Foundation and other private foundations, corporations, and individual donors.

Mass Humanities' signature grantmaking program, *Expand Massachusetts Stories*, is a special funding opportunity for organizations seeking to reexamine, record, and amplify new narratives about the people and ideas that shape our communities. Grants of up to \$20,000 are awarded for projects that collect, interpret and/or share narratives about the Commonwealth, with an emphasis on the voices and experiences that have gone unrecognized, or have been excluded from public conversation.

This program includes the following tracks:

- Open Track (27 grants in 2023): Open to all eligible applicants and projects; proposals are reviewed through a competitive application process.
- Climate Track (12 grants): Open to all eligible applicants and projects; proposals are focused on community-level storytelling and conversations about the local impact of climate change. Proposals are reviewed through a competitive application process.
- Advancing Equity Track (15 grants): Open to applicants whose projects are led by people from historically excluded communities, and whose organizations meet additional criteria. Selected applicants will develop final applications through a non-competitive review and approval process that includes cohort workshops and application development support with Mass Humanities staff and additional advisors.

Mass Humanities has also recently administered *Staffing Recovery* grants, representing \$1.2M awarded to 35 small humanities-focused organizations across Massachusetts, made possible by pandemic recovery funds.

In addition to our *Expand Massachusetts Stories*, which will be the focus of this evaluation project, we run three other programs that also aim to deepen local engagement with the humanities: the Clemente Course in the Humanities, Reading Frederick Douglass Together, and Museum on Main Street. More information can be found on our website at www.masshumanities.org.

3. Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the following aspects of our grantmaking program:

- Effectiveness: To what extent have the program's objectives been achieved?
- Efficiency: How effectively are resources being allocated and utilized?
- Impact: What are the short-term and long-term outcomes of the program on grantees and the broader community?
- Sustainability: Are the program's results sustainable in the long run?
- Lessons Learned: What insights can be gained to improve future program design and implementation?

We have identified several key areas for study, including the following:

- Networks and cross-sector connections
- Participant outcomes
- *Advancing Equity Track* process
- Sustainability
- Understanding our cross-sector grantee community
- Testing Mass Humanities approaches

The evaluation design should include both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Some insights can be gleaned via discovery work/a document review (e.g., looking at existing data in applications and final reports). Some new data will need to be collected, as determined with the evaluator during articulation of the evaluation plan, via interviews with stakeholders (e.g., grantees, staff, community partners), surveys, focus groups, demographic analysis, or other creative approaches.

4. Activities & Deliverables

Activities will be fully defined in the initial stages of the contract, but will generally include:

- Review and refine organization's Logic Model for the grantmaking program
- Establish reasonable, time-bound, achievable assessment goals and evaluation plan to test Logic Model's claims
- Begin evaluation activities and data collection
- Data analysis
- Final report creation and presentation
- Recommendations for building evaluation into program model long-term
- Guidance around publishing findings

The selected evaluator will be expected to deliver the following:

- Evaluation Plan (June-July 2025): A detailed plan outlining the methodology, timeline, data collection tools, and analysis approach.
- Interim Report (October 2025): A mid-point report summarizing initial findings and any adjustments to the methodology.

- Final Report (April 2026): A comprehensive evaluation report that includes:
 - Executive summary
 - Detailed findings and analysis
 - Conclusions and recommendations
- Presentation: A presentation of findings to Mass Humanities' staff and board to be held at a mutually agreed upon date/time.

5. Evaluation History

Since 2021, Mass Humanities' grantmaking has been driven by two interlocked goals: *change the story; change the field*. To achieve those goals, we've focused our *Expand Massachusetts Stories* grants on projects that surface and share stories of Massachusetts that are not generally recognized in the mainstream, with an emphasis on peoples and communities often excluded from authentic representation.

Mass Humanities has also made structural changes to our grantmaking processes to prioritize funding projects that have been created by and for historically excluded communities; to mitigate the risk and burden on those communities when applying for grants; and to create support for project development that enables us to fund projects that might be deemed too risky in a standard review process.

Three years in, Mass Humanities has measurable successes to celebrate:

- Continued to make project-based granting a focus, enabling our grants to support humanities-focused work that happens beyond the (exclusive) institutional humanities field
- Explored models for operational funding for humanities organizations and implemented the *Staffing Recovery* grantmaking initiative to fund staff positions at small humanities-focused non-profits with operating budgets under \$300,00, many much smaller. Though not directly related to EMS, this work could provide useful data.
- Committed to learning from funded projects about what is important for story-focused work to be successful and how to define success.
- Designed the *Advancing Equity Track* as a pathway to funding projects led by people from historically excluded communities and whose organizations met additional criteria. Through this track, we:
 - Reduced the up-front "cost/risk" to applicants by supporting applicants (selected through an easy-access LOI process) with workshops and 1-1 advising, ahead of their submitting a full application.
 - Ensured funds were sufficient to fully award any applicant who was asked to complete a full application—creating, essentially, a non-competitive round.
 - Increased our support for BIPOC-led projects from 45% to 67% of total grantees in the *Expand Massachusetts Stories* program.

Additional changes to our internal processes were also completed, to make our applications more equitable and more of a partnership between Mass Humanities and grantees.

Now, we are seeking to assess the outcomes of the changes we have made; test, or support with research, some of the underlying assumptions that motivated the changes; and understand what is needed to deepen impact and make changes sustainable and successful over time.

6. Proposal Requirements

Ideal candidates will have demonstrated experience in evaluating grantmaking programs or similar initiatives; an approach to evaluation methods that aligns with the evaluation objectives; and the ability to complete the evaluation within the specified timeframe.

Proposals should include the following components:

- Experience and Qualifications: A resume or description of your qualifications, including relevant experience in program evaluation, especially in related programs.
- References: Please provide at least two references from similar projects.
- Samples of Previous Work: Samples of relevant evaluation reports or materials related to other past projects.

7. Submission Instructions

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to:

Katherine Stevens, Director of Grants and Programs
kstevens@masshumanities.org
(413) 203-6242

Please submit your proposal via email by March 15 with the subject line "Evaluator RFP" to jobs@masshumanities.org.

We anticipate making a decision by April 15, with the contract beginning shortly thereafter. Thank you for your interest, and we hope to hear from you.

FAQ

Q: In the overview section of the RFP, you note several goals for conducting this evaluation work now (inform program improvement; lay the groundwork for future data-driven decision-making; bolster case-making; inform a broader publication). Do you see these all as of equal importance to Mass Humanities, or are some of these goals higher priority than others?

A: They are all of high importance. We would rank them in this order:

- ♣ Inform program improvement
- ♣ Bolster case-making
- ♣ Lay ground-work for future data-drive decision-making
- ♣ Inform a broader publication

Q: Can you say a little more about that broader report on the public humanities field and what you see as the ideal relationship between this project and that document (or any other publication of the evaluation findings)?

A: After completion of the evaluation, we would seek the evaluator’s suggestions for publication in established journals and opportunities for co-authorship, to be completed after the contract period. As one of 54 humanities councils across the nation, we collaborate with our peers on reports and statements about our field and see the evaluation results and publication supporting that work.

Q: The RFP summarizes the number of grants made in each track in 2023. Is that the full universe of grant-making under this initiative? Or were other grants made under the Expand Massachusetts Stories strategy before or after 2023? And what’s the typical duration of these grants—e.g., is it safe to assume that the grants made in 2023 have been completed?

A: Mass Humanities has been awarding grants in the EMS initiative 2021-present. A typical year included an “Open Track” and “Advancing Equity Track.” Grant durations are typically 12-16 months with the possibility of timeline extensions.

Q: Do the grantees typically collect or report any data or information about the outcomes of their projects on participants or the broader community? In general, what kind of information is included in final grant reports?

A: Grantees do submit reports with basic data about participation, demographics, and project contents, and lessons learned. Mass Humanities also collects data at the application stage about organization size and project leadership demographics.

Q: Could you say a little more about what you mean by the following areas for study: networks and cross-sector connections; sustainability; and understanding our cross-sector grantee community?

A: Network: In addition to grantmaking Mass Humanities has brought together applicants and grantees for knowledge sharing and network-building. We are particularly interested in the impact of that work.

Cross-sector: Cross-sector nature is a factor to be considered in the structure of our grantmaking and the humanities field. We give grants to both “traditional” humanities organizations (museums, historical societies) as well as organizations that do humanities projects but whose missions are broader (community organizations, neighborhood development, service organizations). Understanding the unique challenges and opportunities of our role is an important part of our case-making, and necessary to making program improvements that support the sustainability of this cross-sector work.