

Evaluation Report:
CT Humanities Core Grant Applicant Feedback
FY2019-23

Submitted to:

CT Humanities

June 2024

Submitted by:

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Executive Summary

This report presents insights derived from interviews with a sample of CT Humanities core grant applicants¹ from fiscal years 2019-2023. The purpose of this study was to assess the applicant experience and communication with CT Humanities staff, understand the perceived value of the application process relative to the funding received, and survey applicant priorities for the near future.

Respondents shared predominantly positive reactions to the grant application process, noting the supportiveness of CTH staff, clear instructions, and the ease of navigating the application portal. **Communication with CTH staff emerged as a crucial factor in the application process**, with a majority of respondents reaching out for guidance, clarification, and feedback. Interactions with CTH grant staff were generally described as helpful and beneficial, facilitating proposal refinement and alignment with CTH priorities. Some applicants considered the effort justified and commensurate with subsequent funding, others expressed frustration, especially smaller organizations with limited resources and staff capacity. Smaller organizations tended to find the process more labor-intensive, while larger organizations were less likely to view it as burdensome.

The comparison between working with CTH and other funders reveals overwhelmingly positive feedback from respondents regarding CTH's responsiveness, clarity, transparency, knowledgeable staff, ease of application and reporting procedures, and supportive nature. A majority of applicants described CTH as more hands-on and engaged than other funders. **Despite occasional frustrations and disappointments, respondents overwhelmingly expressed a willingness to apply for grant funds from CTH again**, underscoring their positive perception of CTH support and responsiveness compared to other funders.

When grants were denied, some organizations continued projects with internal or alternative funding, others modified projects, and some faced delays or discontinuations. Despite this, most organizations adapted by seeking alternative funding or adjusting project scope.

CTH funding has enhanced programming and organizations through increased audience reach, improved quality, new initiatives, capacity building, partnerships, and community engagement. When asked about their immediate needs, interviewees prioritized 1) financial sustainability, 2) infrastructure investment (in particular, investment in general operating support), 3) audience engagement, and 4) program development. Respondents anticipate the following challenges ahead: fierce competition for funding, limited resources, and overreliance on individual donations. While some organizations have secured funding for their priorities, others are still seeking operating support, emphasizing the ongoing necessity for diversified funding and strategic approaches to securing resources.

¹ Core grant applicants applied for one of the competitive grants offered multiple times each calendar year such as Sponsorships, Quick Grants, Capacity-building, Implementation, and Planning grants.

Introduction

In January 2024, CTH staff initiated a comprehensive review of the prior five years of grantmaking. This review included a quantitative review of over 2700 grants funded through the CT Humanities Fund and extraordinary funds² made available during FY2019-23 (published separately) and a qualitative review of a small sample of interviews with core grant applicants from the same period. This report is based exclusively on the interviews conducted during March and April 2024.

CT Humanities offers a wide variety of grants to support strong humanities projects and institutions. Core humanities grant lines are competitive grants offered multiple times each calendar year. Smaller grants like Sponsorships and Quick Grants support an extensive array of public humanities events such as discussion-based public programs, exhibitions or tours. Larger core grants include Capacity-building, Implementation, and Planning grants to help Connecticut organizations strengthen their internal operations or plan and implement humanities activities such as exhibitions, public programs, and interpretive digital media projects.

To gather valuable insights from applicants and grantees, 40 organizations from the FY2019-23 core grant applicant pool were randomly selected by an external researcher and invited for brief interviews. These discussions focused on their experience with the grant application process, current organizational priorities, and the nature of support received from CTH staff. All applicants had direct involvement in one or more core grant applications to CTH. A total of 31 individuals shared feedback, resulting in a robust 78% organizational response rate. See Appendix for additional details regarding the selection process, the final interview sample, limitations of this study, and the interview questions.

1. Application process

Applicants were asked about their overall experience with the grant application process, whether it was positive, whether they communicated with staff prior to submission, and whether they would apply for grant funds from CTH again. Responses were predominantly positive about the application process and CTH communication.

Some respondents elaborated on their positive experience, mentioning aspects like the supportiveness and helpfulness of CTH staff, clear instructions, and the ease of navigating the application portal.

The process is easy, the online access is great and when we have questions staff respond to us in a timely manner.

A few respondents reported an application process that is "very detailed" and "a lot of work," or "a real pain," suggesting that some aspects may be difficult to navigate. One applicant noted possible redundancies:

² Extraordinary funds included CARES Act Humanities Relief Grants, CT Cultural Fund Operating Support Grants, CT Humanities Cultural Relief Grants (CHEFA), COVID Relief Fund for Museums, CT Summer at the Museum/CT Museums-Kids are Free Summer Grants, and SHARP Grants.

In the portal, there is usually a project summary, a project case statement, and a project description. I think that could be condensed.

Other respondents mentioned that while the application may be detailed, they viewed that as a positive because it helped strengthen their grant proposal:

It's good that people have to float their ideas past staff at CTH before they spend time putting a proposal together. It helps you know what the outcome may be ahead of time, or how you can strengthen your grant proposal. Yes, dealing with their staff helps you make it the best it could be.

Until now, we've done mostly private fundraising. This grant was the most informative in terms of what information they asked for. Helped us think about what we needed to do to professionalize. We had to be able to answer their questions. [It was] an informative, well thought out process.

Some respondents mentioned that grant writing is a challenging task, particularly for smaller organizations with limited staff and resources and less expertise.

Overall, respondents appreciated the support, clarity, and ease of navigation provided by CTH, even if a few respondents acknowledged the effort required in grant writing. The feedback suggests that CTH is doing many things well, but there may be opportunities to streamline or simplify the process, provide additional guidance or resources, and support applicants with varying levels of expertise and capacity.

Applicant communication with CTH staff

All applicants for Quick Grants, Capacity Grants, Planning Grants, Implementation Grants and Sponsorships are required to reach out to CTH grants staff before submitting an application. The majority of respondents interviewed for this report (but not all) said they communicated with CTH staff prior to submitting grant applications (n=24, 77%). Respondents with denied applications were less likely to have communicated with CTH staff before submitting.

When applicants communicated with CTH staff prior to applying, they were most often seeking guidance on project suitability for funding, clarifying application requirements, receiving feedback on a draft proposal, or ensuring alignment with CTH's priorities.

A few respondents mentioned instances where they did not communicate with staff, either due to time constraints or because they were new to the organization and were unaware of the importance of such communication.

Respondents who communicated with CTH staff found the interactions to be helpful and beneficial for their grant application process, with 11 respondents directly mentioning the usefulness of receiving feedback on their proposals.

If I needed help, I know I can reach out. If I call, they always call back. They are supportive and direct and I appreciate that.

CTH was helpful, prompt, responsive, knowledgeable, and very easy to work with.

They are good coaches, good guides. Feedback is honest, and they make reasonable comments.

Several respondents described **prospective consultations** with staff members to discuss project suitability for funding, clarify application requirements, or to seek guidance on crafting competitive proposals. This communication took many forms (email, phone, or Zoom). Early communication helped applicants understand expectations and helped applicants refine their proposals accordingly.

I had several phone meetings with Becky and Lian. They are super helpful with listening to where the organization is at and saying, 'Yeah, that's a good fit for you'.

About a third of respondents (10 of 31) are aware of the availability and importance of **draft reviews** where staff members provide feedback on proposals, offer suggestions for improvement, and clarify any ambiguities in the application.

Yes, we had a meeting on one of the bigger grant proposals. They reviewed a draft of our proposal, read through it and commented through their portal. We were able to see their responses in writing. That generated questions, and we had a call with them. The process was very helpful. It gave us a sense of whether we were likely to get the money at all. Whether we'd get the full amount or partial. Very positive thing.

I did contact CTH and then submitted a draft which they reviewed and listed suggestions which I incorporated prior to the final submission.

I thought the review process was useful, because it helped me understand what the funder wanted, even if I didn't agree with it.

We're a four-person staff so I have a lot of other priorities. It's almost never possible to take advantage of a draft review.

Only one respondent specifically referenced attending an **information session** organized by the Southeast CT Cultural Commission. Respondents were not directly asked about information sessions, thus these data cannot speak to the usefulness of information sessions.

Is the time spent on the application and final reporting worth the funding received?

While half of the respondents in our sample found the time spent on the application and reporting process justified and beneficial, other respondents presented mixed responses or expressed frustration about the level of effort required relative to the funding obtained.

Positive Responses: Many respondents felt that the time spent on the process was appropriate for the level of funding received. They appreciated the support and guidance received from CTH and believed that the effort invested was worthwhile.

Yes. The application process was reasonable - I like their applications. Enough questions to provide information within reason.

Yes, It was worth our while for many reasons: the financial impact on the community and increased awareness of community theater. Our town First Selectman was aware. Win-Win all the way around.

Yes, these are short grant applications. You turn in 20 pages for \$10k. I've turned in 3 pages for over a million dollars, or 15-20 pages for \$1k. The burden with CTH is not bad.

Mixed Responses: Some respondents had mixed feelings about the appropriateness of the time spent. They acknowledged the value of the process for learning and development but expressed concerns about the workload relative to the funding amount, especially for smaller grants.

Time invested is okay. Some info was repetitive, but time spent was 65% valuable. It's good to think through what you want and what your 'ask' is.

In pure numbers? No. It costs us much more to develop exhibitions than the grant. But you have to temper that with the public's reaction - which is not monetary. They were thrilled with the results of the exhibitions. The public loved it. But it's an investment for us if the grants can't cover the costs of the person writing the grant because so much has to be done up front.

Negative Responses: Other respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the time investment required for the application or final reporting process, particularly for smaller grants. They felt that the process was overly burdensome for the amount of funding received, and some questioned the efficiency and complexity of the requirements.

I think it's inappropriate. For small organizations like ours, there wasn't enough money to pay staff to administer grants, write proposals, report on grants. I just volunteered my time. I think that's not sustainable. If I billed for my time, it would use up the entire grant. I allowed myself as a staff member to be exploited. I don't know the solution for this. It

ends up on the shoulders of already underpaid people working in small museums who can only make small grants work if we agree not to be paid.

I wish they offered more support for exhibition programming and not just events around our exhibitions. I have no current plans to apply to CTH now. Maybe a Quick Grant to pay for didactics for the environmental exhibition - but overall, it's too much of our time spent writing a grant to get \$5000.

It was an educational process to understand what the bar was for this particular grant. In terms of the required report - I understand why it is requested (detailed financial data) but it was a LOT of info and took a lot of work to compile that data.

Organizational size and level of effort needed for grant applications

One or two respondents from large organizations indicated that some grants are too small to be worth the effort, and some small organizations find writing grant applications to be a disproportionate burden on their skeletal and all-volunteer staff. Is there some formula for 'just right' grantee and grant award 'fit'?

A \$5k grant should not require the amount of time and detail that goes into these Quick Grant applications. Organizations that are smaller than us may find \$5k to be a lot of money, but for us it is a drop in the bucket. The Quick Grants are the simplest to apply for and they still aren't that simple! Quick Grants are more approachable and straightforward. I know where it applies in our work.

Overall, the data suggests there is a relationship between the size of organizations and their assessment of the time spent applying for CTH grants. Respondents from larger organizations were less likely to describe applying and reporting as a burden. Respondents from smaller organizations were more likely to describe grant applications as 'time-consuming' or 'labor-intensive' and struggled with the time investment:

We're going to try and spend more time to partner with funders who can provide general operating support and multi-year funding. That's worth our time. We do have a lot of small grants and a small staff. The burden of applications on such a small staff is significant.

CTH applications are very detailed. They are more complicated than other grantors. The good thing is, you have to have your ducks in line. For us, it was a very expensive process. The person who worked on these grants, we could not continue to afford to employ them. We ultimately cannot afford to keep a person with expertise like this on staff.

How does working with CTH compare with other funders?

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive when asked to compare CTH to other foundations or funders. Many respondents praised CTH for its:

- Responsiveness, clarity, transparency
- Knowledgeable staff
- Ease of application and reporting processes
- Supportive and helpful nature
- Alignment with their organization's goals and values

Many respondents have had positive experiences working with CTH, citing its responsive and knowledgeable staff, ease of application and reporting, and supportive nature when compared with other funders.

I'm not having early conversations with other funders. 60% of the time it's just sending in an application. CTH wants to engage with their communities, they want to really make a contribution. It ultimately saves me time. Donor advised funds, or institutional funding may not have staff for me to talk to at all.

One respondent described feedback from CTH staff as 'helpful, but not executable':

CTH staff are helpful, but their ideas aren't always executable for me. I don't have a staff of 20. It's hard. They want to be helpful and it comes from a place of good intention, but sometimes it's not executable. Normally, if I'm asking for a grant, I'm asking for funds for something that already exists. I'm asking the funder to help support something already defined. So when a funder proposes doing it their way, that almost always costs more. It is an interesting relationship to have it be more of a negotiation. But it's only a negotiation if we want it to be.

Several other respondents also described CTH as more hands-on and engaged than other funders, and that they appreciate the personal touch and willingness to help. As noted earlier in this report, several respondents mentioned that CTH's application and reporting processes are easy to navigate and reasonable in their requirements.

I've been involved with CTH, and with museums since 2000. I've known Scott Wands forever. I'm impressed that CTH is one of the biggest humanities foundations in the nation. I think it's excellent, overall. So if small organizations think they have to jump through hoops, I don't think it's a lot for what you get. CTH sends out emails, they do a lot of advocacy - they have done great work in CT for so many years. No complaints.

CTH is not as convoluted as other foundations we've worked with. Their level of transparency comes across as authentic to us. They are responsive to our needs. They are not cumbersome. From our perspective, they have clarity about where they are putting their dollars. [This is] not always true with other foundations.

This [interview] process speaks to the seriousness that CTH gives to giving a voice to humanities organizations in the relationship building process. They take the extra steps to make that happen. CT Humanities serves the public interest.

Overall, the responses suggest that CTH is a well-regarded and supportive funder, with a reputation for being responsive, knowledgeable, and easy to work with. The application

and reporting processes are considered reasonable and generally proportionate to the funding received. It may be that a few applicants experience CTH's advisory feedback to be prescriptive. In general, however, the majority of respondents appreciate CTH's support and responsiveness when compared with other funders.

2. Suggestions from applicants

CTH grant applicants provided constructive critique of their experience with the application process and identified general areas for improvement. This section synthesizes the critical feedback, highlighting areas for improvement to enhance the application process.

Redundant Data Entry: One respondent suggested a way to reduce data entry, and considered an opportunity for a shortcut.

I wish the institutional information would auto-populate. It would be nice to have a form repository to pull those data instead of re-upload.

Application Complexity and Timing: A few respondents reported that CTH applications are very detailed and more complicated than those of other grantors. This complexity can make the application process challenging and time-consuming, especially for staff with little grant-writing experience.

When the grant is small, it would be nice if there was a shorter form.

Now we are familiar with the whole application process. We can make sure of the people we need to get involved and form a team.

Some respondents acknowledged their own challenges with timing, such as realizing the requirements of the application too late or feeling unprepared because they did not yet have the schedule or cost details required for a successful grant application.

It's an issue of timing. Our event is the end of September. So I can't wait for a July [grant start date] deadline for an Implementation grant, it's too late. But trying to apply by the April 1st deadline is difficult. We don't have our artists confirmed that far in advance. Our cycle of performances and their cycle of grant deadlines don't always agree.

I left some things blank because I didn't yet have costs. Could we have a line for anticipated costs? That would help.

In contrast, some applicants are not hampered by the details and don't hesitate to provide estimates when needed. For example,

I must admit, writing isn't too difficult for me and the financial reporting is fairly easy. But they want to know how much is everybody's time worth, hanging posters, calling to negotiate with agents, etc. Who knows? I fabricate stuff if I need to.

Frustration and Disappointment: Although we specifically asked respondents about their core applications for Capacity Building, Planning, Implementation, Sponsorships and Quick Grants, more than half of the interview sample had received CT Cultural Fund Operating Support Grants during the pandemic. Some respondents mentioned these grants and expressed frustration or disappointment with the lack of ongoing funding for operations:

We tried for the operating grant and were hugely disappointed that the legislature didn't reauthorize those operating funds. It would have specifically moved us forward on some of our strategic goals.

I'm so disappointed that the Cultural Fund money has not been re-funded by the state. That really is going to impact organizations like ours that are run entirely or mostly by volunteers. That funding didn't just pay the bills, it helped us get over the hump of completing projects that are worthwhile.

Additional opportunities to connect: A few respondents would welcome additional contact with CTH staff or other grantees, whether it be for simple check-ins, accountability, networking, or potential collaborative opportunities:

I would like to have the ability to have conversations with staff as we are concluding the grant - some sort of check in process during the grant period too.

I know it's impossible for CTH staff to come out to every program, but our program was so meaningful that we would have loved a representative from CTH to attend our event.

One thing that's been valuable in some funding programs - bringing grantees together from specific funding streams has been a nice thing. It fosters collaborations. One of the racial justice grants involved a few in-person networking and sharing opportunities. We ended up collaborating with another organization. We observed one of their diversity trainings - we were able to take advantage of that. This raises the whole community. I think that could apply to Quick Grants.

Resource Constraints: Limited staffing or financial resources can make it difficult for smaller organizations to meet the demands of the grant application process, particularly when it requires extensive preparation or expertise.

Despite the challenges highlighted above, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they would apply for grant funds from CTH again. In some cases, respondents had a CTH application in progress. Overall, respondent critical feedback highlights areas where the grant application process could be improved to make it more efficient, accessible, and aligned with the needs of the applying organizations.

3. When grants are denied, do applicants receive useful feedback from CTH?

More than half of all respondents (19 of 31, 61%) knew for sure that they'd been denied a grant award with CTH at least once in the last five years. Five respondents report that they did not receive any feedback about their unsuccessful application, and another five applicants couldn't remember whether they had received CTH feedback.

Overall, respondents who remember receiving feedback about their denied grant application had varied comments about the usefulness of the CTH feedback. Some applicants found it helpful, receiving clear direction on how to improve subsequent applications so that their proposals aligned with CTH's priorities.

I learned that I was asking for something not aligned with the way they fund grants (eg. no expert involved). I got a very nice email explaining how they fund and how I could have gotten funds for that program. I was looking for general operating monies, and he explained that if I'd bring in an expert for our program that would be a way to fund it.

The 2020 application was declined and we did receive feedback. Reviewers indicated that they liked the program but that the investigator had not fully realized the complexity, difficulty, and cost of the work. The investigator encouraged us to seek outside collaborations in order to avoid overlap.

Unsuccessful applicants mentioned feedback from CTH staff that highlighted a need for more detail, more scholarly content, a broader audience, or a stronger connection to humanities activities. When applicants felt the feedback was not helpful, they mentioned timing issues, or stated that feedback wasn't relevant to their specific situation or audience.

I didn't yet have the schedule or details that CTH required of us. Feedback wasn't really useful. Something about the timing of our proposal was wrong.

[Application denied due to] lack of connection to humanities activities. Feedback gave us some clear direction to move forward. It was a broad swath program in the arts. I think trying to find a fit for an arts organization under their umbrella is a little tricky.

The feedback wasn't appropriate for my particular audience. This [project] was a different type of exposure for a more naive audience.

How did organizations respond when grants were denied?

When organizations did not receive a grant award, respondents often continued the project with internal funding or reallocated resources. Some projects were reduced in scope, and others were delayed or discontinued.

Continued with internal funds, reallocated resources, or additional fundraising: About a third of denied applicants (n=8) continued their projects using internal funding or other sources of revenue. A few respondents mentioned reallocating resources or seeking alternative funding sources to support the project.

The grant process was pretty quick – I knew I didn't get it within a week or two. So I reached out to local businesses for their support.

Our revenues are around \$50k each year, so not receiving the grant wasn't consequential. However, we are certainly going to miss the operating funds we got last year.

We went forward with it, fundraised for it and were able to create the documentary video. Turned out to be wonderful.

Modified or slimmed-down versions, or changes in scope: Two other applicants who did not receive awards mentioned proceeding with the project but on a smaller scale, either due to financial constraints or delays in securing alternative funding. These respondents described a change in the project's scope, either by cutting certain components or adjusting the project's timeline or objectives.

One project we did anyway. We did the performance piece, but we cut the talkback component. Talkbacks are a nice add on to a performance, but the project did go on.

I think we did get some funding elsewhere so we were able to finish but the scope was smaller.

Delayed or discontinued: In about a third of the denied cases, projects were either stopped altogether or delayed due to the lack of funding, necessitating a search for additional financial support.

It delayed the project. We needed to look for other sources of funding. We ended up with a slimmed down version of the project.

We were unable to do the project at all. We could not get it started.

Overall, most respondents who were denied a CTH grant award adapted to the absence of grant funding by seeking alternative funding, continuing with internal resources, or adjusting project scope or timeline. About a third of the respondents who had a grant denied did not implement their proposed projects.

4. Impact of CTH funding on grantees

We asked respondents to speak to the ways in which CTH funding had an impact on their programming, or their organization. Based on the responses, CTH funding has had a significant impact on programming and organizations in the following ways:

1. **Increased audience reach & accessibility:** Respondents report that access to CTH funding has helped their organization make their programs and events more accessible to a wider audience, including online events and virtual programming. Organizations reported an increase in audience numbers:

We had to upgrade our technical capabilities. Which is fine, because now we can videotape and put it up online for people to watch online. That improves the amount of people who can see the program by 100%. In person might be 100-200 people in-person, but double that can watch online. Huge increase in audience.

Funding from CTH has been extremely important and even pivotal in some projects. Especially the Spanish translation. We were able to pilot translation, and now we do it with ALL of our translations.

2. **Improved programming quality:** Respondents described using CTH funding to upgrade their technical capabilities, hire professionals, and create more engaging programs with greater impact. (see above)
3. **New initiatives and projects:** CTH funding has allowed some organizations to launch new projects, exhibitions, and programs that they wouldn't have been able to undertake otherwise.

The grant we applied for was specifically for marketing a particular production. The subject of our production had to do with mental health, and it was important to involve the community and inform the Department of Social Services as well. We were able to do that with a marketing professional who helped hone the message and craft multiple press releases.

The investigator of the program submitted [an application] and was also funded for a subsequent Planning grant, which will lead to the creation of a permanent exhibit at the museum where the university has a dig site.

...allows us to conduct upgrades to the silversmith shop - we turned it into a publicly accessible museum space. We're so proud of this. A lot of places closed their doors between 2020 and 2022, and we opened a new property. We're all volunteers. Having access to this funding is what made it successful. We couldn't do it without CTH help.

4. **Capacity building/Professional Development:** CTH funding has helped organizations build organizational capacity, which then led to hiring new staff, and upgrading facilities.

We added a 1/4 time position at the museum. Adding that convinced our Board of Directors that this position was worth having. Going forward, we developed funding for that position. But having somebody to work on collections curation was a big change for the organization. The grant helped demonstrate the value of somebody doing that work.

CTH grants have all had impact. I said, "We need a plan." Scott suggested a consultant who was a wonderful help. Covid was in full swing, we had a series of meetings with the trustees, and we wrote a detailed 3-yr strategic plan with 6 operating goals and that has driven the work we do. It has had so much impact. We also re-wrote our vision statement, and developed our acquisitions, ethics, and facilities use policies. All so impactful. Also marched ahead with improving the physical space.

The strategic plan totally changed our thinking and how to move forward. That made a huge difference. Educated our entire board. We got another grant for our archives - two different ones. We had a mess and we are completely organized now and know what to do. [We] obtained a different outside grant to help us because the CTH grant helped us get organized.

- 5. Partnerships and collaborations:** CTH funding has facilitated partnerships and collaborations with other organizations and artists.

We were able to bring students to the museum and ran a huge professional development day with 60 teachers. We hired someone from the museum to facilitate an engaging process with teachers and helped teachers work with each other. Great resources for the teachers to learn directly from the Jewish Heritage museum. [We were] ...working with teaching artists and school teachers to create a curriculum using arts learning for students to digest what they'd learn while at the museum.

- 6. Community engagement:** CTH funding has enabled organizations to engage with their communities to foster connection and conversation. Respondents frequently pointed to increased online events, increased audience size, and new programming initiatives that reached a broader audience, including families and children.

We were able to run a program we really really wanted to do and would not have had the funds to cover expenses. We didn't want people to have to pay to attend the event. CTH funding allowed us to make it free to the public.

We're a historical society. We've always had a goal of doing programming for children. We were able to think through how to engage families with children.

There's no question that the humanities funding revolves around the educational events that surround an exhibit. And that's where CTH funding comes in and makes it a more impactful event for the public. It increases visitation and public

interest. Events increase exposure to our organization. From that perspective, I'm on board.

- 7. Attracting additional funding:** One respondent from a very large township explained how CTH funding can validate a project or plan and attract additional funding:

The SHARP grant [from CTH] gave the Town inspiration to move forward with a project, gave us validation – that it is a project worth pursuing. It gives the town a reason to believe that what they are doing is worthy. The goal here is to stack funding on top of other funding. Our State Historic Preservation Office applications for preservation of other structures around town were impacted by that first SHARP grant. Those reports provided a road map of some historical assets that needed care.

When we have support from CTH, it's extremely validating with other donors.

- 8. Survival and sustainability:** Respondents often referred to the CT Cultural Fund Operating Support Grants that distributed state monies to arts and humanities organizations between 2022 and 2022. Although these extraordinary funds were not the focus of our research, respondents were very clear: these grants were instrumental and supported their survival and sustainability during the pandemic.

5. What do applicants need now? Where are the funding gaps?

We asked respondents about the organizational priorities or programmatic needs that require their priority attention for the remainder of 2024. Overall, half of all respondents emphasized an immediate need for financial sustainability and infrastructure investment (both physical and human infrastructure). Audience engagement and program development were also pressing concerns.

Financial operations and sustainability: Half of all respondents (n=16) prioritized securing funds. The immediate focus is on securing funds to sustain ongoing programs and operations, including summer programs and locating a stable space.

We are in the midst of setting up systems - capacity building. We're 7 yrs old and we're getting a lot of grants from CT Dept of Agriculture, and USDA and it's a very specific percentage that can be spent on salaries. Our educators are 70% of our total budget. Grants can't support salaries and benefits. I just wish there would be more support for general operating support. Making sure I can continue to pay my staff is a priority.

[We need] operational funds. Money that will allow us to keep our programs running. We are currently organizing for summer, and we have irons in the fire, but we do not know where the money is going to come from.

Long-term financial sustainability is also a concern. After relying on temporary funding sources due to COVID-19, respondents seek to diversify income streams, and are keenly aware of addressing funding uncertainties beyond their current commitments.

Our subscriber base is down 50% since pre-pandemic. We're still feeling that. We're also in campaign mode for our endowment which directly impacts our longevity and stability.

During Covid we got the PPP funding, and then the CT Cultural Funding which allowed us to maintain a high level of operations. We even increased staff and allowed us to professionalize a bit more. Now the cost of insurance along the coast has doubled, and funding has dried up. So in one fiscal year, it left us with a budget hole. Operations funding is our biggest need. We do have diverse income streams, but we're taking a hard look to see where we can raise a little more money.

Infrastructure: After financial concerns, respondents most often cited exhibit and facility upgrades and renovations as a priority need area (n=13 respondents). This includes continuing long-term plans for facility upgrades, addressing structural maintenance, developing exhibits with relevant historical themes and narratives, and addressing facility needs (e.g., ADA compliance, paving a parking lot).

There are no grants available for salaries so we're going to have to figure this out. We lack operating capital. We have 10 buildings from 1771 to the 1900s - we are always in need of maintenance and repair.

We have to address the facility - we have a great building, it's a museum (not a historic property) on an acre, we're mortgage free. We have zero curb appeal, very nondescript... and bathrooms are not ADA compliant. We need to pave our parking lot.

Respondents focused on infrastructure were almost always from small organizations (<\$250,000 annual operating expenses). In addition to maintaining and upgrading physical infrastructure, respondents also acknowledged a need for building their staff and leadership assets. This includes leadership and board transitions, establishing organizational systems, and addressing staffing needs.

Audience Access and Engagement: When asked about immediate needs, a third of respondents (11 respondents) touched on audience outreach and engagement issues. Whereas finance and infrastructure are inward-looking concerns, audience issues are critical components of a thriving humanities institution as it looks outward to a community of diverse audiences.

Accessibility and Program Support: Respondents reported concerns about accessibility, supporting audience outreach, and rebuilding audiences post-pandemic. One respondent noted:

We are still struggling to recruit participants and get audiences in the door. We've been relying on this funding and other revenue streams (ticket sales, public events) and still haven't bounced back yet.

Diversity and Audience Engagement: When asked about immediate needs, respondents also report that increasing diversity among boards and audiences is a priority. This includes expanding marketing efforts, focusing on equity-based programming, providing support for traditional and nontraditional students, and expanding community engagement efforts.

We're always looking for more opportunities. The only thing is, we are a formally rural/suburban town and diversity is a struggle for us. We absolutely want diverse people to feel welcome and seen and heard. We'd like funding to help us speak to diverse communities.

...diversity of our board and our audience is a huge issue. We've been bringing that diversity onto the stage to increase education and knowledge of other cultures. Native tribes, a Turkmenistan performer, opera singers from other cultures as well. It's very hard for us to recruit to meet diversity standards.

Program Development: Ten of the 31 respondents specifically mentioned a need to focus on programming issues for the remainder of 2024 and into 2025. These organizations intend to pursue grants and sponsorships for program development and for expanding outreach programs. They seek to develop engaging programs around America 250 (CT's commemoration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence), historic property anniversaries, and expanded library and school programs.

Have organizations been able to identify funding for their stated priorities?

Based on interview responses, 14 of 31 organizations have identified funding for their priorities, either through grants, donations, or other sources. Another 17 organizations have *not* identified funding for their stated priorities, are unsure, or are still seeking funding sources or waiting to hear about pending grant applications.

Common challenges heard from multiple respondents included:

- Competition for funding: Organizations face stiff competition for limited funding sources. Some organizations struggle to find funding for specific priorities, such as building projects or staff salaries.
- Limited bandwidth: Some organizations lack the resources or personnel to pursue funding opportunities.
- Reliance on individual donations: Several organizations rely heavily on individual donations and support from board members, which can be unpredictable.

Organizations are seeking to diversify their funding sources to reduce reliance on a single source, and working to build relationships with funders and demonstrate the impact of their programs. Some organizations are exploring collaborative efforts to develop plans and secure funding. And respondents also report advocacy efforts to raise awareness and secure funding for their priorities.

Appendix I

Sampling and Response Rate

An independent researcher generated a random sample of 40 organizations from the set of 787 FY2019-23 core grant applications. CTH staff reviewed the sample only to exclude respondents with current or past service on the CTH Board of Directors.

We invited the primary contact on file for each organization to schedule a short phone interview with the researcher at their convenience. We sent two follow-up messages to non-respondents by email. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage respondents to speak freely.

A total of 31 individuals responded and completed feedback interviews (78% organizational response rate). All respondents had direct involvement in or knowledge of the grant application submission. More than half of these respondents were successful grantees (55%). Nineteen of the 31 organizations (61%) had at least one unsuccessful grant application in the past five years. The data in Table 1 describe the final group of organizations participating in interviews:

Table 1: Respondent Sample: Organizational Type, Budget Size and County

Organization Type	N=31	%
Arts Organization	11	35%
History/Museum/Society	10	32%
Educational	4	13%
Library	3	10%
Other	2	6%
Arts Museum	1	3%
Budget Size		
< \$250k	18	58%
\$250k - \$849k	6	19%
\$850k - 2.4m	3	10%
\$2.5m and above	4	13%
County		
Fairfield	8	26%
Hartford	7	23%
New London	5	16%
New Haven	4	13%
Litchfield	2	6%
Middlesex	2	6%
Windham	2	6%
Tolland	1	3%

When compared with all FY2019-23 core grant applicants, organizations from Fairfield County were overrepresented in the sample, whereas organizations from Hartford were underrepresented. Arts organizations were overrepresented in our interview sample (27% of all applicants, but 36% of the interview sample).

Limitations of this study

Respondents included in this study were leadership or staff members of CT organizations that applied for a grant from CTH during the FY 2019-23 period. In some cases, this means we were asking applicants to think back to 2019, or look back at records that were a few years old.

Although we specifically referenced an applicant's core grant application during interviews, it is possible that respondents were thinking of grant applications submitted to *other* funders when they responded to our questions. For example, four of the respondents in this study represented organizations that recently received 2023 "Good to Great 2.0" grants. These grants did involve CTH staff, but Good to Great grants are funded by the Department of Economic and Community Development in partnership with Connecticut Humanities – they are not the core grants that are the focus of this study (Capacity Grants, Implementation Grants, Planning Grants, Quick Grants, and Sponsorships).

Spring 2024 CT Humanities feedback interview questions

- **Application Process** - Were you directly involved or do you have direct knowledge of the grant application to CTH? Was it a positive experience? Did you communicate with CTH staff prior to submission? Any suggestions regarding the application process?
- **If any of your applications were declined** - Did your organization receive feedback as to why your application was declined? Was the feedback useful? What would help you the next time you apply for CTH grant funding?
- **Impact of CTH Funding** - Has CTH funding had an impact on your programming or your organization? Overall, was the time spent on the application process from writing the proposal through submitting the final report appropriate for the level of funding received?
- **Need Areas/Funding Gaps** - What organizational or programmatic needs require your attention this year? Has your organization been able to identify funding for this year's priorities?