



Readers participate in Oklahoma Humanities' "Let's Talk About It" program in fall 2016 at Oklahoma City University. Due to budget cuts, Oklahoma Humanities is launching in August and September the "Let's Talk About It: Abridged Version," a new, shortened adaptation of its signature program. PROVIDED BY OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

# TURNING THE PAGE

Oklahoma Humanities soldiers on even with continued threats to NEH funds

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The Oklahoman  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The past four months have been anything but "business as usual" for Oklahoma Humanities.

Despite having its general operating support grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities terminated in spring, the nonprofit grant-making organization is soldiering on, even introducing an abridged version of one of its flagship programs.

"We're living through history every day ... so I think just every day is something new," said Oklahoma Humanities Executive Director Caroline Lowery.

As of Aug. 1, Oklahoma's state partner for the National Endowment for the Humanities, or NEH, has officially vacated its offices on the ground floor of



Oklahoma Humanities' offices inside the Arts District Garage in Oklahoma City, seen here on July 29, are mostly emptied, with a sign on the door notifying people that the employees are working remotely.

BRANDY  
MCDONNELL/THE  
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# Humanities

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the Arts District Parking Garage in downtown Oklahoma City. As a cost-cutting measure, Oklahoma Humanities' staff is working remotely.

"Closing our physical office space was one of those flexibility-minded decisions that our board was able to make. And it's what the moment requires," Lowery said.

After initially pausing the fall 2025 session of its "Let's Talk About It" book club program, Oklahoma Humanities is launching in August and September the "Let's Talk About It: Abridged Version," a new, shortened program that's still offering libraries, museums, correctional centers and more the chance to literally start a new chapter.

"Let's Talk About It" is the longest-running program at Oklahoma Humanities, celebrating its 40th anniversary this year," Program Officer Rayne McKinney said in an email. "It's this longevity and stability that allowed us to quickly adapt the program to the current, uncertain circumstances."

Created in 1965 as an independent federal government agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities supports research and learning in history, literature, philosophy and other areas of the humanities by funding selected, peer-reviewed proposals from across the country.

As the nonpartisan, nonprofit state affiliate of the NEH, Oklahoma Humanities typically receives an annual appropriation from the federal agency.

On average, the organization funnels more than \$250,000 of its federal funds back into communities across the Sooner State by awarding grants to museums, libraries, universities, historical societies and more.

As part of the controversial and often chaotic cuts by the Trump administration's Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, more than 1,000 NEH grants were suddenly terminated in April.

That includes grants provided to every state humanities council, including Oklahoma Humanities, which has administered the distribution of more than \$42 million in federal funds from the NEH in the Sooner State since 1971.

With the cancellation of Oklahoma Humanities' two open general operating support grants, the state had about \$1 million a year in federal funds stripped away.

Also in April, the University of Oklahoma lost more than \$1 million as several of its researchers had open NEH grants suddenly terminated.

In May, President Donald Trump unveiled a budget proposal that included \$163 billion in spending cuts to non-military programs, as well as plans to eliminate the NEH, National Endowment for the Arts and Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Also in May, the Mellon Foundation announced a \$15 million emergency funding commitment to the Federation of State Humanities Councils in response to the federal funding cuts.

The New York-based foundation provided an immediate \$200,000 for Oklahoma Humanities, plus an additional \$50,000 available as a matching grant.

"That just gave us breathing room to figure everything out. ... We've raised \$40,000 of the \$50,000 in the matching funds, so that's been a huge relief," Lowery said, adding that donations Oklahoma Humanities receives through December count toward the match.

"We're so thankful for our donors. The Kirkpatrick Family Fund was able to give us \$20,000 of the Mellon match ... and just the whole state has risen to the moment and helped us."

## What is the status of Oklahoma Humanities' programs?

Despite facing significant layoffs this summer due to the funding cuts, the NEH on Aug. 1 announced \$34.79 million in grants for 97 humanities projects across the country, including the largest grant awarded in the agency's history: \$10 million



From left, Caroline Lowery, Derrick Sisney and Mack Savala talk during the April 13, 2024, opening of the Smithsonian Institution's traveling exhibit "Voices & Votes: Democracy in America" at the Nowata Historical Society & Museum in Nowata. PHOTO BY CHELSI LEBARRE/OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

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**Caroline Lowery,**  
Executive director, Oklahoma Humanities

to the University of Virginia to support expedited completion of editorial work on important papers related to the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution and the Founding Era to mark the nation's 250th anniversary in 2026.

Also included in the latest NEH grant announcement: An Oklahoma State University collaborative research project, led by assistant history professor Merle Eisenberg, received \$248,786. Titled "Pandemic and History: Disease, Myth, and the End of Antiquity," the OSU project involves research and writing leading to a book on the first recorded plague pandemic, which lasted from around 541 to 750, and the evolution of the narratives about it.

In addition to awarding grants, Oklahoma Humanities provides three free programs: Oklahoma Humanities magazine; Museum on Main Street, a partnership with the Smithsonian Institution that brings traveling exhibits to rural Oklahoma communities; and "Let's Talk About It," the traveling statewide book club that brings people together in conversation.

"The grants we give out, those are on hold," Lowery said. "We are still invested in our educational publication, our Oklahoma Humanities magazine. We have decided that, for the fall issue, we are going digital to save on print costs. We always produce a digital version so that it's free and accessible on our website. We're just also not printing 10,000 to 15,000 copies."

"Let's Talk About It," that is primarily supported through private fundraising efforts; the only federal funds that uses is the staff salary," Lowery said. "That was a really small gap we had to make up. So, we felt really comfortable moving forward ... but the unsurety of the situation led us to do the abridged version."

Instead of the usual five-book format, the abridged version involves a one-time, scholar-led reading and discussion program exploring one book.

Host communities still receive a stipend to cover all costs, and titles picked range from Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" and Bram Stoker's "Dracula" to Billie Letts' "Where the Heart Is" and Carolyn Hart's "Letter from Home."

In addition, correctional centers in Atoka, Boley, Hodgen, Holdenville, McLoud and Taft are hosting the program to serve Oklahomans experiencing incarceration.

"In a number of the correctional facilities, we're the only cultural programs. ... We're also in rural or isolated areas that just don't have access to this

kind of programming," Lowery said. "Some of the libraries have done it every year for 40 years ... So, we're happy to be flexible and pivot."

## What is the future of Oklahoma Humanities as budget negotiations continue on Capitol Hill?

Budget negotiations on Capitol Hill are a major concern for arts and humanities advocates, organizations and agencies.

Phoebe Stein, president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, said that the councils channel NEH funding back into local communities to "foster the cultural vibrancy needed to draw in tourism and economic investment, connect neighbors through conversation, and inspire civic engagement."

"Their effectiveness and fairness in bringing federal dollars back to states, where they leverage funds at least 2:1, is one reason humanities councils have bipartisan support in Congress and why Congress has consistently chosen to fund the NEH and councils over the past five decades," Stein said in an email to The Oklahoman.

"Any cuts (to) federal humanities funding will negatively impact our nation's schools, museums, libraries, historic sites, and community nonprofits."

In July, the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee recommended a 35% cut to the NEH, which would set its fiscal year 2026 budget at \$135 million, down from \$207 million.

But the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee followed by including \$207 million for the NEH in its funding bill recommendations for next year.

In September, following the August congressional recess, both the House and Senate Interior Appropriations bills go to the floors of their respective chambers.

For Lowery, though, it's hard to trust the usual budget process after Oklahoma Humanities had its operating funds yanked away this year.

"The president's budget had us zeroed out. Congress said, 'No, we broadly support this, as do our constituents. We want this funding. In fact, state councils, here's more money.' So, we're watching it, and it seems like good news. But so much has happened," she said.

"We still haven't resolved the issue of what happens if the president doesn't spend the money the way Congress said it should be spent, and that is so above our heads and pay grade."