

Chicago Humanities

Executive Director
Chicago Humanities
Chicago, Illinois

THE SEARCH

As Chicago Humanities (CH) approaches its 40th anniversary in 2029 and plans for its third endowment campaign, the organization seeks an inspiring, forward-thinking, and visionary leader to serve as its next Executive Director (ED). As the leader of one of Chicago's most vital civic and cultural institutions, the ED will exhibit passion for protecting and advancing the humanities and the arts in the region and beyond. Reporting to the Board of Directors, the ED will serve as CH's chief strategist, ambassador, and fundraiser; focus on expanding its audience, member, and donor base; and sustain CH as a crucial cultural platform where curiosity, creativity, and community converge. The ED will manage a budget of approximately \$5 million and a staff of 25, plus approximately 30 seasonal employees, and serve as a key architect of strategic planning in the furtherance of CH's mission, vision, and financial health.

A unique, innovative, and dynamic not-for-profit, Chicago Humanities is a presenting organization that features programs that reflect on the past, explore the present, and consider the future through the multiple lenses of the arts, humanities, and social sciences. With the core belief that the arts and humanities play a fundamental role in understanding and addressing the pressing civic, social, and cultural issues of our time, CH hosts compelling conversations, engaging events, and powerful performances. These feature authors, artists, scholars, policymakers, and thought leaders at the forefront of their fields, sharing new insights into the human condition.

Chicago Humanities has retained Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm, to assist in the identification and selection of this new leader. All inquiries, applications, and nominations for this opportunity should be directed to the search firm as indicated at the end of this document.

ABOUT CHICAGO HUMANITIES

A vital Chicago cultural institution, Chicago Humanities connects people and ideas to cultivate a more informed, inspired, empathetic, and participatory society. Insightful, entertaining, and interactive, CH

events bring diverse audiences together to consider the ideas of notable figures, both established and emerging, including Nobel Laureates; Pulitzer Prize-winners; MacArthur Fellows; Oscar, Tony, and Grammy Award-winning artists; and Chicago's most powerful civic and cultural voices.

Chicago Humanities was founded in 1989 by a determined group of Chicago's cultural leaders eager to extend the humanities' rich ideas to wider public audiences. The first Chicago Humanities Festival, a one-day symposium, was held on November 11, 1990, at the Art Institute of Chicago and Orchestra Hall. Since then, programming has expanded to year-round, gathering some of the world's most exciting thinkers, artists, and performers to celebrate ideas in the context of civic life. Presented in partnership with premier [local and national cultural, educational, and civic organizations](#), and produced in some of Chicago's most remarkable venues, the thoughtfully curated Fall and Spring Festivals bring approximately 80 events to neighborhoods across Chicago – from South Shore to Pilsen, Bronzeville to Hyde Park, Old Town to Evanston – in partnership with organizations in those neighborhoods. To reach an expanded audience in the digital age, Chicago Humanities now also offers [online viewing of past events](#) and a podcast, [Chicago Humanities Tapes](#). Prior to COVID, all CH programming was live and in-person. Since the onset of the pandemic, the organization has introduced these types of online programs, demonstrating adaptability as it continues to determine the appropriate revenue model for a presenting organization in today's digital and cultural landscape.

Chicago Humanities has a long history of experimenting with new formats and content to evolve with changing times. Upon resuming events after the pandemic shutdown, CH experienced significant programmatic growth, expanding to new neighborhoods and upwards of 130 programs annually. In the past year, the organization has reshaped programming with an emphasis on maintaining the tent-pole events that drive earned revenue and are financially sustainable. This change is aligned with the organization's 2025 strategic refresh that outlined the following priorities:

1. Deepening audience and donor engagement.
2. Creating a new model to reshape programming, production, and philanthropy in the post-pandemic environment and return to economic sustainability.
3. Developing a new community conversation to strengthen the distinctiveness of seasonal festivals and community partnerships while introducing new program models that enhance financial performance.
4. Better telling of CH's story and impact.

Chicago Humanities has an annual operating budget of approximately \$5 million and an endowment of approximately \$16 million. It has over 1600 member households and more than 140 giving society donors. CH's inclusive model demonstrates its long-standing commitment to offering accessible programs at affordable ticket prices. With less than 20 percent of revenue earned from ticket sales annually, CH currently relies on other financial support, including philanthropic support (individual, institutional, governmental) and a modest distribution from the endowment to cover expenses.

ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Reporting to a 26-member board of directors, the Executive Director provides strategic and operational leadership for Chicago Humanities. The ED leads CH's staff and seasonal employees in developing and achieving strategic priorities, including program, audience, and financial goals. This includes managing the organization's annual operating budget as well as capital expenditures to ensure fiscal health, resource alignment, and accountability through the development of multi-year budgets. With the director of finance and the finance and audit committee of the board, the Executive Director manages the investment of the organization's endowment. The centerpiece of Chicago Humanities is its two seasonal festivals – the Fall Festival and the Spring Festival. In collaboration with the two co-creative directors, the ED guides the successful production of these hallmark festivals, ensuring programmatic excellence, innovation, and accessibility. The Executive Director's senior leadership team includes: a chief operating officer, two co-creative directors, a director of development, a director of marketing and communications, and a director of finance.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The next Executive Director will be empowered and expected to:

Lead Chicago Humanities into its next era with an expansive, inclusive, and sustainable vision of public humanities

Building on CH's reputation as a vibrant hub for public humanities, the ED will provide visionary leadership to explore how to strategically develop and grow the organization's strengths to effectively meet the moment. The next leader has an opportunity to enable CH to boldly and sustainably move forward, building on its strong foundation to embrace a changing era in live programming. Expanding upon the 2025 strategic refresh, CH must continue to prioritize promoting the value of the public humanities and intentionally cultivate a diverse and inclusive community of employees, presenters, and audiences, all while ensuring the financial viability of the organization as it embarks on its next chapter.

Strengthen and expand Chicago Humanities' resource and donor base to support the organization's mission and secure its long-term sustainability

The Executive Director will be responsible for ensuring that Chicago Humanities attracts the resources required to produce the exceptionally high-quality programs for which it is known. As Chicago Humanities' chief ambassador, in close collaboration with the board of directors and the development team, the Executive Director will inspire and steward current individual and corporate donors, foundations, and government funders by building authentic relationships and compellingly communicating CH's value. They will also identify and cultivate new funding sources, as well as create and implement long-term financial strategies to reduce the organization's operating deficit, allowing the endowment to grow over time. This will entail exploring new models of revenue generation. It will be essential to expand earned income streams, partnerships, and sponsorships with key leaders in the cultural, civic, academic, media, and

philanthropic communities of Chicago to strengthen institutional resiliency. With an ambitious campaign focused on individual giving on the horizon, the Executive Director will partner with the board of directors and the development team to ensure the organization is well-positioned to thrive in the medium- and long-term.

Enhance Chicago Humanities’ brand, build audience loyalty, and leverage community partnerships to ensure the continued success of the organization

To ensure that Chicago Humanities continues to flourish in an increasingly saturated Chicagoland cultural market, the organization must continue to distinguish itself and gain further local and regional recognition for its top-quality programming that is thought-provoking without being agenda-driven. While its anticipated 2025 revenues are nearing pre-pandemic levels, expenses have risen significantly over the past five years. The Executive Director will lead the organization in effectively conveying CH’s value proposition to prospective audience members and in developing a robust case for support from CH members and donors. The ED will inspire enthusiasm and passion for Chicago Humanities’ vital mission of protecting the arts and humanities in civil society, thereby drawing others into programming and partnerships. Through galvanizing messaging that shapes communication across all audience and donor segments, the organization will foster broad support and a vibrant and visible public presence.

The ED will be a forward-thinking leader with a broad vision and an ability to enthusiastically identify and pursue creative approaches that attract new, younger, and more diverse attendees and developing them into loyal, long-time supporters of the organization and its mission. Recognizing that the organization’s revenue model is not static, the ED will partner closely with the co-creative directors to deepen CH’s civic relevance, expand platforms, and find new ways to reach a broader audience without significantly increasing production costs. One strategy will be to work with the co-creative directors and the programming team to deepen critical programmatic partnerships with cultural, academic, and civic institutions, as well as develop new partnerships.

Develop, lead, retain, and inspire a cohesive team of high-performing, mission-driven staff in a hybrid environment

Chicago Humanities’ staff are exceptionally mission-driven and hard-working, frequently on a tight timeframe that follows the festival schedule. A majority of staff have joined the organization in the last few years, including two co-creative directors who joined in 2022. CH follows a hybrid schedule in which most staff are in-office three days each week, but this varies by season depending on programming. The Executive Director will set the tone in fostering an inclusive, collaborative, and inspiring organizational culture. They will recruit, nurture, and retain a talented, skilled, and diverse team, empowering them to grow professionally as they advance organizational priorities. Enthusiasm for supporting individuals with a range of tenures and responsibilities will be essential. The ED will model leading with transparency, accountability, and empathy so that teamwork and innovation thrive, and reporting lines between senior leadership and the rest of the staff are clearly delineated.

Leverage the talent, passion, and commitment of an engaged board in advancing Chicago Humanities' mission

Chicago Humanities is supported by a devoted and active board of directors – both newer members and longer-standing members – all of whom share a deep passion for CH's mission and engagement in its work. As the chief visionary, ambassador, and fundraiser guiding CH in its next chapter, the Executive Director will work closely with the board in setting and advancing strategic priorities, and ensuring strong governance and organizational alignment. As an ex officio member of the board of directors, the ED will act as a trusted partner and advisor to the board in building a shared vision for CH's next era of impact. They will also help to translate between the board and staff, serving as a bridge between the two to promote understanding.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Research shows that people belonging to structurally marginalized groups often only apply to jobs if they meet 100 percent of the qualifications. As no one ever meets 100 percent of the qualifications, we encourage you to apply if you feel that most of the following qualifications reflect your experience and expertise.

- Demonstrated passion for Chicago Humanities' mission of promoting and protecting the arts and humanities.
- Fluency in communicating the importance and impact of the arts and humanities and inspiring a range of audiences.
- Executive-level leadership experience, including the management of a highly skilled staff, complex programming and budgeting, strategic planning, and building a strong and inclusive organizational culture with best practices and a high level of staff morale.
- Demonstrated financial management and significant fundraising experience for long-term organizational planning and sustainability.
- A creative and open mindset with enthusiasm for trying new ideas.
- Demonstrated ability to quickly build and nurture partnerships within a rich and complex cultural landscape, including with non-profits, community organizations, civic leaders, and donors.
- Understanding of and appreciation for the potential of technology in the live performance space.

COMPENSATION AND LOCATION

The anticipated salary range for this position is \$200,000-220,000 annually. Chicago Humanities provides this salary as a good-faith estimate of the starting pay range, considering factors such as (but not limited to) the scope and responsibilities of the position, the candidate's work experience, and education. In addition to the salary offered, Chicago Humanities offers health coverage (fully funded for the employee), dental, vision, 403b retirement plan (with a 7% employer match), life insurance, short and long-term disability, equitable parental leave, and paid time off accrued at 20 days per fiscal year. The entire Chicago Humanities office has a winter break (December 25—New Year's Day) and a select number of Summer Fridays. Chicago Humanities recognizes ten observed holidays and provides for one floating religious holiday annually.

Chicago Humanities works in a hybrid model, with three days in the office and two days working remotely. The organization's offices are located in Chicago's River North neighborhood. While working remotely, the Executive Director will have access to a laptop computer and a \$50/month stipend to offset home internet and personal phone expenses.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and CVs with cover letters should be sent via the Isaacson, Miller website: <https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/chicago-humanities/executive-director>

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Chicago Humanities is committed to providing a diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive workplace where all employees and volunteers, whatever their gender, race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, age, sexual orientation, education, or ability, feel valued and respected. We are committed to a nondiscriminatory approach and provide equal employment and advancement opportunities across all departments, programs, and policies. We respect and value diverse life experiences and heritages, and ensure that all voices are valued and heard.

This document has been prepared based on the information provided by Chicago Humanities. The material presented in this leadership profile should be relied on for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and information provided by Chicago Humanities would supersede any conflicting information in this document.