



sundance
institute

**SUNDANCE INSTITUTE
HUMANITIES SUSTAINABILITY
FELLOWSHIP
EVALUATION REPORT**





INTRODUCTORY LETTER FROM HAJNAL MOLNAR-SZAKACS

Director, Artist Accelerator at Sundance Institute

In March 2022, we launched the Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship, an unprecedented pilot program funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities through the American Rescue Plan. The Program provided 20 nonfiction mediamakers at all phases of their careers with financial, creative, and humanities-centered support for their humanities-focused feature-length documentary films and nonfiction emerging media projects. The fellowship stipends, totalling \$60,000 per fellow, offered direct individual support and were meant to offset the deep degree of financial harm that already under-resourced nonfiction mediamakers experienced due to the pandemic. Additionally, this pilot created an opportunity to examine possible program structures that provide financial security to mediamakers, in turn allowing them to prioritize their creative endeavors. This was one part of a larger goal of supporting sustainable creative careers, a vital component for building a deeper understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

The Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship was a vital intervention in a field where only one quarter of documentary professionals make a full living doing documentary work and only two in 10 earned enough money to cover production costs and make a profit from their most recent film. A 2020 study by the Center for Media and Social Impact and the International Documentary Association found that 40% of nonfiction storytellers didn't make any revenue at all from their most recent film.¹ The impact of COVID-19 only exacerbated these issues with a financial loss of approximately \$15.2 billion among national nonprofit arts and cultural organizations.²

Our cultural dialogue has a vital need for mediamakers, and this pilot program was a bold new way of supporting artistic practice. Our goal was to offer an intervention that would signal to mediamakers that their voices, their stories, and their ambitions mattered. The unrestricted stipends shifted the power away from funders to grantees. The cross-disciplinary collaborations between mediamakers and humanities professionals strengthened the dialogue between the humanities and the documentary spheres. The invitation to engage with Sundance staff, other fellowship recipients, and professionals in the field offered mediamakers an opportunity to build community and grow their networks.

Our goal was to offer an intervention that would signal to mediamakers that their voices, their stories, and their ambitions mattered.

We are grateful to have had the opportunity to work with 8 Bridges Workshop’s Jessica Fiala and Sarah Lutman on this report. Their rigorous approach, careful analysis, and insightful observations of the Program offer us a valuable tool to use as a reference for further conversation and interrogation as we continue to imagine a more sustainable future for mediamakers.

We are also deeply appreciative of the National Endowment for the Humanities and their generous support of the Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship.

Lastly, thank you for reading this report. We welcome your comments and feedback and hope this initiative plants the seeds for future programs that support collaborations, increase representation in the field, and empower mediamakers to create meaningful work.

Thank you,
Hajnal Molnar-Szakacs



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¹Caty Borum Chattoo and William Harder. *The State of the Documentary Field: 2020 Study of Documentary Professionals, Complete Data for Global and U.S. Respondents*. Washington, D.C.:Center for Media & Social Impact, American University School of Communication, in association with the International Documentary Association, 2021. https://cmsimpact.org/report/the-state-of-the-documentary-field-2020-study-of-u-s-documentary-professionals/https://cmsimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CMSI_StateofDocField_full.pdf

²Americans for the Arts. “COVID-19’s Impact on The Arts Research & Tracking Update: February 8, 2021.” <https://www.artsactionfund.org/sites/artsactionfund.org/files/COVID-19%20Research%20Update%20%202-8-2021.pdf>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically affected the livelihoods and projects of mediamakers. Across the philanthropic spectrum, funders sought new ways to support creators through this period of unprecedented hardship. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, made possible by the American Rescue Plan, Sundance Institute created a year-long Humanities Sustainability Fellowship, pairing mediamakers with humanities advisors to support the development of feature-length documentary films and nonfiction emerging media projects engaging with humanities themes. This report gathers learnings of broad relevance from this singular effort, highlighting program elements such as unrestricted support, cross-disciplinary mentorship, and cohort-based professional development models.

Fellows, advisors, Sundance Institute staff, and others generously shared their insights and experiences, as well as suggestions for continued reflection. These learnings are gathered into 10 core findings.



Stephanie Black, production for Humanities Sustainability Fellowship project.

Unrestricted Support

1. Fellows valued the freedom to determine their own working cadence and goals.
2. Multilayered and unrestricted support had a positive effect on fellows' wellbeing.
3. Unrestricted financial support provided structure for the program, while allowing fellows to apply funds to a range of personal and project expenses.

Advising & Guidance

4. Targeted advising was a meaningful component of the program on personal and practical levels.
5. A project's stage of development informed how humanities advisors approached their work.
6. Connecting across disciplines requires onboarding to help all parties understand each other's perspectives and design parameters for collaboration.
7. Advisors benefit from combining learning and mentoring.

Program Connections

8. Cohort and professional development activities offered practical support and avenues for further reflection.
9. Sundance Institute's renown and staff commitment contributed to fellows' positive experiences.

Systemic Challenges

10. Fellows faced longstanding challenges of obtaining necessary additional funding, recruiting and retaining core team members, and managing long-duration media projects.

The pandemic has waned, but its long-term impact has sparked widespread rumination on funding processes and priorities. Learning and experimentation continue, with this report serving as one step in an extended process to create meaningful, responsive support structures for mediamakers. Our hope is that these succinct insights spark further conversations and action steps in service of cultivating ways to equitably and mindfully support the creatives who drive and inspire the fields in which we work.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

This report chronicles a response to an unprecedented crisis that led to piloting a new model for supporting medi makers. On March 13, 2020, amidst the rising spread of COVID-19, the U.S. government declared a national emergency. With little notice, film and media productions halted and planned shoots were canceled. Filmmakers and medi makers found themselves facing an unknown pandemic, intensified by uncertainties surrounding income and creative projects.

Across the philanthropic spectrum, foundations and other entities began experimenting with methods to quickly release funds to arts and cultural organizations as well as individual creators. In this vein, the Sundance Institute launched a series of responsive initiatives, including a \$1 million emergency relief fund, partnerships to provide emergency funds to organizations and individual medi makers, virtual programming, and free access to professional development and networking resources on the Sundance Collab website.

On a larger scale, the 2021 economic stimulus bill known as the American Rescue Plan (ARP) released \$1.9 trillion through a range of channels, from expanded unemployment benefits and child tax credits to direct payments, small business grants, and other aid packages. Through the #SHARP initiative (Sustaining the Humanities through the American Rescue Plan), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) provided \$59 million in relief directly to humanities institutions and organizations and \$28.8 million to 13 regranting organizations to administer grant programs to support humanities efforts by organizations or individuals.



Sundance Institute, in-person regional gathering of Humanities Sustainability Fellows based in Los Angeles. From left to right: Jackson Kroopf, Zaina Bseiso, Nesa Azimi, Marlene McCurtis, Hajnal Molnar-Szakacs, Elizabeth Ai, and William Caballero

Mediamaker Fellowships

NEH regranting funds went to a breadth of organizations selected through a proposal process, including three media-focused entities: Sundance Institute, Firelight Media, and Independent Television Service (ITVS). Each organization designed a program to support mediamakers incorporating the humanities into their work, with programs slated to run roughly April 2022 through March 2023:

- Firelight Media’s SPARK Fund was designed to deliver financial relief to mid-career filmmakers who self-identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color, whose work on historical or humanities-focused documentary film projects was disrupted by the pandemic.
- ITVS’ Humanities Documentary Development Fellowship supported 20 filmmakers working with humanities scholars and content advisers developing documentaries for public television.
- Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship provided unrestricted stipends to 20 independent nonfiction mediamakers working on humanities-centered projects.

Focused Evaluation and Broad Learnings

The Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship reflects a particular point in time. The fellowship, however, sits within much larger conversations spanning creative, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors. Alongside assessing recent experiments to quickly release funds during the pandemic and streamline grantmaking processes, organizations continue to grapple with fundamental issues, from advancing equity and racial justice to the challenges faced by mediamakers striving to build sustainable careers. Alongside the pandemic, increased attention to wellbeing, mental health, and work-life balances have informed approaches to funding and other support systems within creative sectors.

Debates and initiatives related to unrestricted funding; alternative models of support; and equity, sustainability, and wellbeing for creators continue to provoke needed conversations. This report aims to contribute to these dialogues through findings that support action and experimentation, paired with ongoing reflection and learning.

ABOUT THE FELLOWSHIP

The Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship was designed to offer financial, professional development, and advising support to 20 mediamakers working on humanities-focused documentary films, podcast or audio projects, and immersive or emerging media projects whose work and livelihood were significantly affected by the pandemic. This section provides a brief overview of fellowship activities, with further analysis and learnings in the report's Findings section.

- Program components included:**
- \$60,000 unrestricted awards, paid out in monthly stipends
 - Dedicated humanities advisors
 - Professional development opportunities
 - Virtual cohort gatherings
 - All Access memberships to Sundance Collab
 - Monthly newsletters sharing opportunities and updates
 - Tailored support from Sundance Institute staff

Artist Accelerator Program

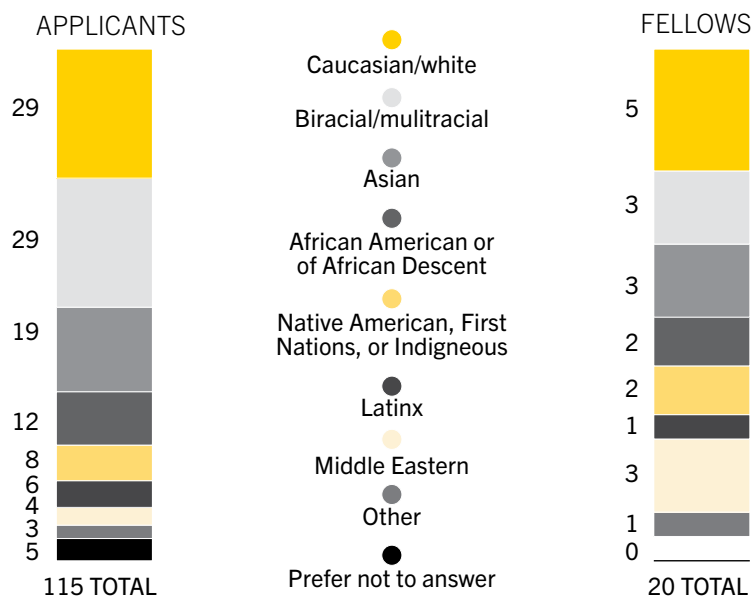
The Humanities Sustainability Fellowship was managed by and housed within a larger initiative at Sundance Institute — the Artist Accelerator program — which launched in 2021. Working at multiple levels, the program aims to engage the industry on topics of equity and transparency; internally provide leadership and strategy across Sundance Institute's granting initiatives; and pilot cross-disciplinary funding and professional development opportunities. During the Humanities Sustainability Fellowship award year, the program launched an Asian American Foundation Fellowship and Scholarship, a Latine Fellowship and Scholarship, and a Project Advancement and Completion Fund. Additionally, the program continued to champion and develop the Non-Fiction Core Application Proposal Checklist to standardize application questions used in non-fiction funding, fiscal sponsorship, and artist support opportunities to alleviate the burden of application preparation on the applicant.

The Humanities Sustainability Fellowship opportunity was announced in early fall 2021, with applications due by December 1, 2021. A two-stage application review convened panels composed of film and media professionals alongside humanities scholars. Sundance Institute notified awardees in March 2022, with fellowship activities spanning roughly April 2022 through May 2023.

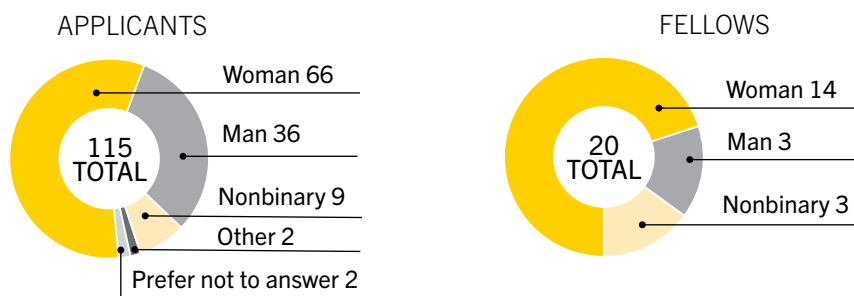
Demographics of Humanities Sustainability Fellows

In-line with Institute-wide efforts to reach new communities of storytellers and audiences across regions, genres, ethnicities, genders, and orientations, the Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship in particular sought applications from mediamakers from underrepresented communities in the humanities.

Race/Ethnicity



Gender



Humanities Advising

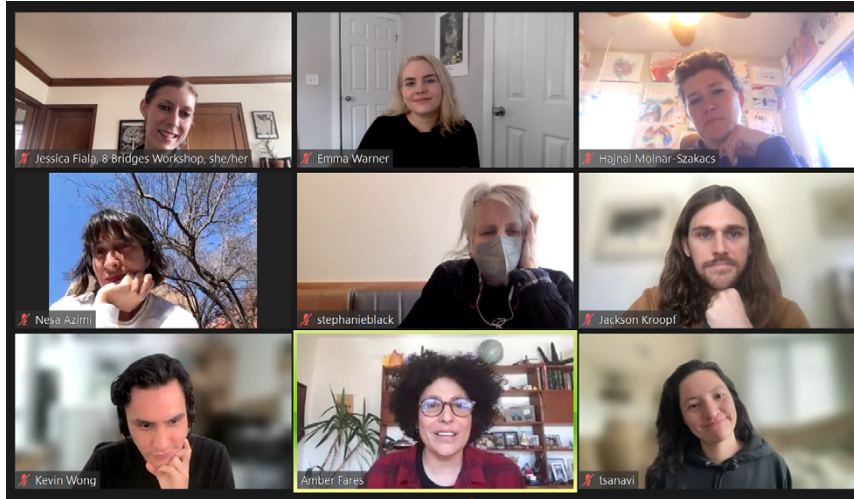
As a program supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities' #SHARP initiative, a core aspect of the fellowship involved pairing mediamakers with humanities advisors — professional specialists, scholars, or academics with expertise in specific humanities fields. Humanities Sustainability Fellows included mediamakers across a range of career stages and project phases who applied to advance a specific humanities-related project over the course of the fellowship period. Originally envisioned as a team of five advisors serving 20 fellows, Sundance Institute adjusted the program structure in response to the breadth of topics covered by fellows' projects. With the intention of enabling more nuanced, focused support, Sundance Institute worked with each fellow to identify an expert advisor for their project. The advisor received a monthly stipend for their participation.

Sundance Institute staff supplemented humanities guidance with as-needed support. Staff met with fellows individually at the program outset and midpoint, and offered further assistance ranging from grant proposal feedback to referrals, work sample reviews, and individual meetings. For fellows at later project stages, Sundance Institute arranged Work-in-Progress sessions in late spring 2023, gathering fellows' creative teams with advisors and invited experts for conversations on early edits and work samples.

As an enormously talented documentary filmmaker, my Sundance Fellow is also good at real-world “casting.” He identified me as an apt interlocutor, and I feel very fortunate indeed to have had the opportunity to work with him. I hope to continue our conversation about matters of deep mutual interest. — Janet Walker (advisor)

Unrestricted Financial Support

The Humanities Sustainability Fellowship provided an unrestricted stipend, paid monthly, to supplement income. Unrestricted funds and an open program structure allowed fellows to self-determine how funds would be used, alongside setting their own project goals and cadence. While each fellow identified a specific project that they sought to advance during the fellowship period, they were not tied to a predetermined development timeline or set of deliverables. Funds could cover personal expenses, such as rent, health insurance, and other bills, or offset project expenses such as travel, equipment, and paying editors or team members.



Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship Zoom Virtual Social.

Professional Development

Sundance Institute coupled stipends and targeted humanities advising with a series of optional professional development activities, some of which gathered Humanities Sustainability Fellows with fellows from other Artist Accelerator programs. Sessions held during the 2022–2023 fellowship period included:

NEH Funding Opportunities

Archiving & Preservation

Archival Producing for Documentary

Festival Strategy

NEH Applications

Budget Masterclass

Impact Strategy

Fiction Producing

Nonfiction Producing

Industry sessions with staff from A24, Diversity Hire, Concordia, Story Syndicate, and Participant Media offered nuts and bolts insights from professionals working in the field as well as the chance to ask questions and meet new contacts. Meanwhile, monthly newsletters provided succinct listings of upcoming deadlines and opportunities, along with updates shared by individual fellows.

For the Humanities Sustainability Fellowship cohort specifically, Sundance Institute organized nine Virtual Socials over the course of the 12-month fellowship. These informal one-hour Zoom gatherings invited fellows to share their progress and challenges, and connect with Sundance Institute staff and each other. The Institute also arranged select in-person gatherings for fellows who attended the Getting Real and Sundance Film Festivals, as well as a cohort dinner for fellows based in the Los Angeles area.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Evaluation Activities

Sundance Institute hired the consulting firm 8 Bridges Workshop to conduct a year-long program evaluation to gather insights for internal learning and field-wide reflection. Evaluation activities primarily spanned July 2022 through July 2023 and included the following:

- creating a program logic model;
- undertaking a document review leading to a slide deck of findings;
- administering a mid-point survey of fellows, coupled with a memo of findings;
- administering end-of-fellowship surveys of advisors and fellows;
- reviewing fellow quarterly reports;
- conducting a total of 16 interviews with fellows, advisors, Sundance Institute staff, application reviewers, and a representative from the NEH;
- meeting regularly with Sundance Institute staff; and
- producing a succinct public-facing evaluation report.

In addition to formal evaluation processes, evaluators attended fellowship activities throughout the year, sitting in on select cohort Virtual Socials, one-on-one meetings with Sundance Institute staff, professional development opportunities, and Work-in-Progress feedback sessions.

Report Framing

The Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship was a unique opportunity made possible by one-time #SHARP funding from the NEH. The findings that follow respond to the program as it unfolded, while aiming to offer useful information for future program development and refinement.

While primarily focused inward, this evaluation is informed by research and writing surrounding trends emerging during this timeframe related to responsive funding, unrestricted artist support, equity in arts and cultural funding and nonprofits, and themes of sustainability and well-being. The report itself is intended to serve as a starting point for conversations with peer organizations interested in areas such as cross-disciplinary mediamaking, unrestricted support models, and creator mentorship.

FINDINGS

The findings that follow highlight strengths of the Humanities Sustainability Fellowship, and also note challenges and insights. Findings are primarily focused on the fellowship’s overarching structure, offering perspectives in service of further reflection on practical aspects of mediamaker support and future conversations — internally at Sundance Institute and industry-wide. Certain throughlines in particular offer areas for consideration, such as onboarding for cross-disciplinary collaborations, benefits of mediamaker-driven milestones, the influence of a project’s stage of production on possible activities, and field-wide difficulties of fundraising for independent media.

While the focus of evaluation activities has been on gathering real-time learnings from the program, the shadow cast by the pandemic cannot be ignored. Communities throughout the United States have largely emerged from lockdowns at the time of this writing; however, mediamakers and creatives across disciplines are still feeling the pandemic’s aftereffects. Moreover, both the pandemic and recoveries are interwoven with existing inequalities. Many grantmakers and nonprofits have undertaken efforts in recent years to address systemic inequities in funding and representation, and yet, significant work remains throughout creative industries. More broadly, making a living in creative fields presents ongoing challenges. This report focuses on actionable steps while also acknowledging that initiatives undertaken respond and contribute to larger currents.

Findings are situated within this context, along with an awareness of the unique nature of the NEH #SHARP funding that supported the fellowship. Specific learnings from interviews, surveys, fellow reports, and other evaluation activities are therefore analyzed with an aim to respond to this past year and identify general insights that offer useful perspectives applicable to an array of mediamaker programs. The 10 findings below are organized by topic, addressing unrestricted support, advising and guidance, program connections, and systemic challenges.



Christine Mladic Janney, research trip for *Searching for Nora*.

UNRESTRICTED SUPPORT

1 Fellows valued the freedom to determine their own working cadence and goals.

The fellowship structure allowed fellows to determine their own milestones, processes for working with a humanities advisor, and level of engagement with professional development and cohort activities. Across interviews, surveys, and final reports, fellows noted particular benefits provided by this flexibility.

Fellows underscored the significance of being able to devote sustained time and attention to their work. Some who regularly take on client work or other jobs described common struggles to slot in periods for their own work in-between paid projects. Such punctuated efforts may involve an intensive workload and scheduling acrobatics. Returning to paused projects can also require reengaging partners, catching up on new developments, and transitioning into the mindset of the particular project topic and tone. Numerous fellows noted that the extended time afforded by the fellowship helped to alleviate these challenges and also provided opportunities to explore specific research topics and develop their own processes and creative voices. Multiple fellows whose projects had been underway for years commented that this focused time served as a springboard, generating momentum that enabled them to make considerable progress.

Separating fellowship support from grant deliverables prioritized the journeys and development of individual creators, which fellows noted allowed them to be responsive to their needs as well as the needs of their projects. While fellows' experiences varied, the program's openness offered a pivotal foundation for humanities-related research processes that may require exploring diverging paths and dead-ends, taking time to examine core questions, or building trust within a community.



William D. Caballero, screenshot from *They Dream*.

Rather than splitting my time between directing this film and freelance work, I was able to focus full time on the project. I think the quality of the project greatly benefited from my ability to give it as much time as necessary over the last year. Additionally, I was able to have time to increase my fundraising efforts and we were able to raise almost the entirety of our budget gap in the past 12 months. For context, we raised more in the past 12 months with me working on the film full time than in the previous four years I had been working on the film part time combined.

— Kevin Wong (fellow)



Kevin Wong, film still from *Home is a Hotel*.

2 Multilayered and unrestricted support had a positive effect on fellows' wellbeing.

In addition to practical benefits, numerous fellows highlighted the mental health effects of receiving unrestricted financial support. Observations included the decrease of negative feelings like anxiety and financial worry as well as positive effects like peace of mind. Additional comments spoke to feelings of empowerment from being entrusted with decision-making responsibilities and being able to efficiently make progress toward their goals.

Being paid to work on their own projects also had a notable effect, with some fellows underscoring the rarity or newness of this dynamic in their careers or for a particular project. Moreover, while the fellowship supported work on a specific project, fellows also emphasized the importance of having support dedicated to them and their career trajectories as mediamakers, rather than funding solely devoted to elements of a project budget.

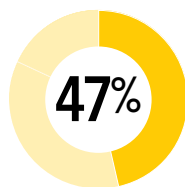
Comments related to wellbeing may also be connected to interrelated, compounding effects of multiple forms of support — unrestricted funding coupled with dedicated humanities advising, supplemental guidance from Sundance Institute staff, professional development opportunities, and cohort activities.

The gift of economic security was ongoing and palpable. The gift of recognition and non-tangible support was equally precious, felt intensely every single day. I cannot stress enough how that goodness permeates all of life, opening the mind, freeing the brain, energizing the soul, making the whole project feel do-able and delightful again. — Immy Humes (fellow)

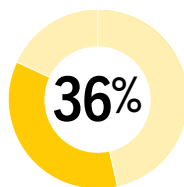
3 Unrestricted financial support provided structure for the program, while allowing fellows to apply funds to a range of personal and project expenses.

Findings are closely linked to the program structure — unrestricted financial support to advance a specific humanities-themed project during the fellowship period. This framework can be differentiated from both project support as well as open-ended fellowships or awards that do not require recipients to work on an identified project. The structure can also be compared with mechanisms seeking to address the financial harm of the pandemic or provide guaranteed income. Undergirding many such efforts lies a value system that emphasizes paying mediamakers for their work, an acknowledgement of long-standing difficulties securing financial sustainability within creative fields.

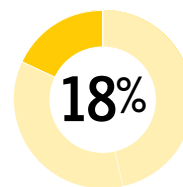
In practice, 47% of the fellows who responded to the end-of-fellowship survey used the funds for a balanced combination of personal and project expenses. Of the remaining respondents, nearly 36% applied funds mostly toward personal expenses and approximately 18% used funds for mostly project expenses. While a number of factors are at play, project stage is one detail to note, with mediamakers in production phases potentially needing to allocate more fellowship funds to project expenses if other funding has not been obtained. On the other hand, fellows in the development phase may be more able to allocate funds to pay for their time in conducting research and informative interviews, networking, ideation, writing grant applications, or other related activities. Such dynamics raise a topic for further reflection related to the underlying values of unrestricted support. If one aim is to advocate for mediamakers to be paid for working on self-initiated projects, this leads to practical questions related to balancing this goal with the expenses involved in distinct production stages and activities.



Balanced Personal
& Project Use



Mostly Personal Use



Mostly Project Use



The financial support allowed me to dedicate all of my time to this project. I have been working on this project since 2006, and the Sundance Fellowship was instrumental in the culmination of this vast undertaking.

— Carmen Oquendo-Villar (fellow)

Carmen Oquendo-Villar, film still from *Todas Las Flores/All The Flowers* featuring Madre Constanza.

ADVISING & GUIDANCE

4 Targeted advising was a meaningful component of the program on personal and practical levels.

Fellows overall shared positive comments about working with humanities advisors, who provided insights related to scholarly expertise and at times served as professional mentors, knowledgeable cheerleaders, mindful listeners, or even collaborators. Several advisors and fellows plan to stay connected beyond the fellowship timeframe, having forged meaningful professional and personal connections.

Humanities-related activities and approaches ranged greatly. The majority of advisors provided some combination of contextual background, research referrals, conceptual input, and general advising and mentorship. Some fellow-advisor partnerships explored in-depth multidisciplinary study — readings, discussions, viewing relevant films, or key concepts and thinkers. Other advisor activities included identifying interviewees or other potential participants, offering feedback on footage or edits, enabling entre into academic circles or conferences, developing accompanying educational materials or impact plans, facilitating conversations with other experts, assisting with funding applications, or helping fellows connect and build trust with particular subjects or communities.

Experiences varied among fellow and advisor pairings. The shift from a set of five general humanities advisors to 20 specialized advisors necessitated finding an appropriate advisor for each project. Some fellows were already acquainted with their desired advisor and were able

to begin at the outset of the fellowship. For others, the process took a few months. Advisor identification, as well as introductions to a fellow's previous work and current goals, are both areas that fellows noted could be streamlined should a similar program model be repeated in the future.

A few fellows expressed an interest in splitting the advisor stipend between multiple individuals. Some noted the possible benefits of connecting with humanities scholars in different disciplines or at different phases of the project. Several fellows identified a need for a mediamaker or industry advisor to provide guidance and insights related to approaches, documentary construction, aesthetics, networking, or logistical challenges.



Ro Haber, film still from *We Are Pat*.

It was the most incredible gift. In working with my humanities advisor, I changed the concept of the film, broadening it to include this modern cohort of trans comedians as a way to answer the film's central question: can we reclaim Pat? I will continue to work with the academics I attached to the project through this fellowship. — Ro Haber (fellow)

5 A project's stage of development informed how humanities advisors approached their work.

Fellows' projects ranged from early research and ideation to advanced production phases, with 30% in development, 55% in production, and 15% in post-production during the fellowship year.

These distinct points within media project development opened up very different avenues for humanities advisor involvement. Earlier-stage projects drew on humanities advisors to develop foundational questions and approaches, scrutinize ethics and methods of working with particular subjects or communities, and inform core content, research, and frameworks. Advisors on later-stage projects helped fellows develop impact strategies and accompanying educational materials, provided feedback on funding applications, and reviewed footage and edits. Each project, however, was distinct, and the cadence of meetings ebbed and flowed in response to project stage as well as emerging challenges and opportunities. At times, fellows and advisors made plans to pause and reconnect after the formal fellowship period to engage the advisor when they could be most beneficial.

These general dynamics reveal questions related to how a project's phase of development informs what activities fellows and advisors can undertake. Differing options connected to project phases prompt questions related to the larger goals of engaging humanities advisors and to what degree specific goals align with particular production phases. As interviewees noted, if efforts to expand representation in media concern both who is represented (mediamakers, subjects, and communities) and also how communities are represented, then early advising may be key for determining central questions, processes, relevant discourses, framing, and aesthetic approaches.

STAGE OF FELLOW'S PROJECTS

30% | Development

55% | Production

15% | Post-Production

It really helped me consider what I can use as potential tools for educational distribution. My advisor helped me create a theme map that the film touches on and will be assisting me beyond the fellowship to create a discussion guide when that time comes. Outside of this she helped strengthen some of my written materials and website content.

— Tsanavi Spoonhunter (fellow)



Tsanavi Spoonhunter, production for *Holder of the Sky*. Photo by Christian Lee Collins.

6 Connecting across disciplines requires onboarding to help all parties understand each other’s perspectives and design parameters for collaboration.

Finding a meaningful way to merge distinct methodologies, knowledge bases, and questions can be an invigorating and challenging process. Collaborations across disciplines require time to build shared language and understandings, as well as to determine the unique intersections and insights that will form a base and touch points for work to come. Additionally, open-ended questions facing programs like the Humanities Sustainability Fellowship offer fodder for ongoing consideration and debate. What constitutes a strong humanistic media project? What practical methods might be used to weave the humanities into media projects? How might a humanities advisor support or question this work? Interviewees and survey respondents offered a number of suggestions for helping program participants develop common ground:

- holding focused orientation sessions,
- facilitating cohort meetings of fellows and/or advisors,
- sharing examples of exemplary humanistic media projects,
- engaging mediamakers who regularly work on humanities projects at various points in the program, or
- examining practical methods of incorporating the humanities into media projects at various stages.

Additionally, applicants, application reviewers, fellows, and advisors may require distinct forms of support. For example, multiple advisors commented that learning details related to media production helped them to better understand what a fellow was undertaking, along with the challenges they faced. Related comments also noted that considering possible audiences and venues could help advisors and fellows explore ways that projects could be geared towards film and media festivals, academic settings, community-based audiences, or public broadcasts.

The fact that this program brought together humanities scholars and makers makes it unusual for a U.S. program and very valuable. Let’s get on board with this idea that humanities scholars have something to offer! Instead of focusing on “disambiguation,” or boiling down a problem to find the answer, humanities scholars tend to focus on how matters themselves are complicated ... we proliferate questions. — Janet Walker (advisor)

7 Advisors benefit from combining learning and mentoring.

Staggered advisor start times during the early months of the fellowship, due to the shift from general to individual advisors, hindered Sundance Institute’s ability to host a group advisor orientation. Beyond identifying a need for an orientation, multiple advisors suggested that the Institute convene advisors as a cohort, alongside the more active cohort of fellows. Recommendations included holding orientation, mid-point, and final debrief meetings; providing a grounding in basic mediamaking processes and stages; reviewing examples of humanistic media; and discussing ways the humanities can be incorporated into mediamaking methods. Advisors commented that such gatherings could provide opportunities for discussion with peers regarding how to approach advising, along with strategies and challenges, or learning key dos or don’ts from the Institute that could serve as guides or comparison points for future evaluation.

In addition to the potential to learn as a cohort, a number of advisors commented on the benefits of working with mediamakers. Some advisors spoke of learning how to better incorporate film and media into teaching, in part through cultivating a deeper understanding of behind-the-scenes processes. For humanities advisors who are mediamakers themselves, some noted new perspectives on their own work, gained through discussions with their Sundance Institute fellow and the process of breaking down and articulating their approaches.

What (or where) are the humanities in this — do we mean questions asked, areas of inquiry explored, themes, or frameworks? By now, I think about these matters instinctively but serving as a mentor on a film project made me self-aware of the relevance of the humanities in developing methods for filmmaking. Helping someone else made it more clear to me. — Frances Negron-Muntaner (advisor)



Sundance Institute, Work-in-progress showing and discussion for Humanities Sustainability Fellow Zaina Bseiso.

PROGRAM CONNECTIONS

8 Cohort and professional development activities offered practical support and avenues for further reflection.

Fellows spoke positively about being part of a cohort, with this social element serving as a counterbalance to the at times isolating experiences of independent mediamaking. In particular, numerous fellows mentioned a desire for an in-person convening, an element not included in the original program budget. Those who were able to attend in-person meet-ups organized by region or in conjunction with festivals or conferences frequently noted these gatherings as a highlight of their fellowship experience. Fellows additionally offered ideas for ways that the cohort element could be enhanced through peer sub-groups based on elements such as geographic region or project stage.

In addition to the benefits of convening mediamakers with different backgrounds and project topics, fellows appreciated the chance to connect across career stages. The majority of Humanities Sustainability Fellows were mid-career (60%), with a notable portion at early

CAREER STAGE OF FELLOWS	career stages (30%) and a couple lifelong career mediamakers as well
60% Mid-Career	(10%), reflecting the need for support throughout career trajectories, including supporting experienced mediamakers.
30% Early Career	Professional development opportunities and Collab membership generally received fairly positive feedback from fellows. Different professional development sessions were, however, more or less relevant for particular mediamakers. This varied by subject matter as well as
10% Lifelong Career	career stage, with experienced fellows seeking advanced topics and emerging mediamakers longing for introductory sessions. More broadly, multiple fellows commented on a desire for creative topics in professional development opportunities, such as working with an editor, storyboarding, examining decolonial mediamaking practices, or discussing community accountability in documentary processes.

Despite valuing cohort gatherings and professional development opportunities, numerous fellows described struggling to make time for these activities. Sundance Institute efforts to meet a variety of schedules included combinations of synchronous and asynchronous formats, including recordings of trainings available after events. The challenge of balancing project demands with professional training and networking, however, can present a persistent challenge for fellows, in particular given differing project timelines as well as activities ranging from planned travel to unexpected troubleshooting.

As an independent doc filmmaker, I am largely self-taught through the experience of making my own work. It is valuable to hear industry professionals share their own process and thus better understand the nuances of the manner in which they approach producing tasks. — Stephanie Black (fellow)

9 Sundance Institute’s renown and staff commitment contributed to fellows’ positive experiences.

Respect and awareness of Sundance Institute — in mediamaking and related industries, and across broader audiences — potentially facilitated external opportunities. Multiple fellows commented that an affiliation with the Institute led to greater receptivity when reaching out to possible supporters such as funders, advisors, and others. Observations related to personal wellbeing, such as increased confidence and sense of validation, at times also directly mentioned association with the Institute.

Fellows also highly valued the support of Sundance Institute staff during the fellowship. In surveys and interviews, multiple fellows called out staff specifically, and spoke to a sense of welcome and support. Numerous fellows noted an appreciation for the invitation to continue relationships with Sundance Institute beyond the fellowship.

Fellowship support was to some degree self-directed, a combination of staff reaching out and fellows expressing their needs and requesting meetings. While comments were overall positive, some fellows noted that they did not always know what they could request, while others commented that they could have benefitted from even more one-on-one meetings, tailored introductions, or other guidance.

The Sundance imprimatur helped enormously in Europe, for which I’m grateful. Nearly everyone I’ve interfaced and worked with in Austria on the project has been extremely supportive (a nice surprise that I don’t take for granted!) and I’m quite sure that the Institute’s involvement at this early stage has been a factor in the warm reception I’ve received.

— Marlo Poras (fellow)



Marlo Poras, research trip to Austria for *The Escape*.
Photo by Joelle Kane.

SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

10 Fellows faced longstanding challenges of obtaining necessary additional funding, recruiting and retaining core team members, and managing long-duration media projects.

The Humanities Sustainability Fellowship offered a unique opportunity for fellows to advance a specific project over the course of a one-year period; however, routine challenges facing mediamakers persist. Numerous fellows encountered roadblocks related to fundraising to support the next phase of their projects or secure key collaborators such as editors or producers. Fellows further noted that funding independent media projects can involve grappling with a combination of necessarily large budgets and inadequate grant amounts. For some fellows, mediamaking is inherently collaborative, raising additional questions regarding how to manage unrestricted funds when working as part of a team. Given the lengthy timelines of many media projects, the end of the fellowship can also present a particular challenge. In the final fellow survey, when asked to choose among ways to potentially improve this type of fellowship, almost 77% of respondents selected extending support for a longer duration. Nearly 60% selected an option for multiple advisors covering both humanities and mediamaking elements. Interviews and surveys revealed additional forms of possible accompanying support, such as production funding, health insurance, support for project team members, or follow-on grants for a project's next stage.

Mediamakers face broad challenges in making a life and a living. While a single fellowship cannot alter systemic problems, insights from mediamakers about what they need can help point the way to incremental shifts and continued conversations that build momentum and change over time.



I don't know a filmmaker who wouldn't know what to do TOMORROW if they had the resources. The question is usually: how do I scale this back so I can make it with the resources I have, or where can I get more resources so I can make the thing I want?

— Kevin Wong (fellow)

Kevin Wong, film still from *Home is a Hotel*.

The Sundance fellowship gave me the freedom to throw myself into my film's production, to try out different storytelling directions, and to take the time to build relationships with subjects on the ground that will only help to advance the project long-term. For that, I will forever be grateful! Now my biggest challenge will be raising the funds I need to see myself through post-production.

— Kathy Huang (fellow)



Amber Fares, film still from *Coexistence, my ass!* featuring Noam Shuster Eliassi at a protest.



Nesa Azimi, film still from *DRIVER*. Photo by Victor Tadashi Suarez.

CONCLUSION

Responses from fellows and advisors to the Sundance Institute | Humanities Sustainability Fellowship were overwhelmingly positive. The unrestricted nature of the funding was credited with enabling fellows to reclaim agency over their processes, driven by the courses of their projects and balanced with their own needs as mediamakers and individuals. Meanwhile, advisors commented on the unique nature of the program and the need for further cross-disciplinary communication, as well as inquiry into what constitutes humanistic media and approaches.

Both fellows and advisors also offered helpful guidance for ways that this form of cross-disciplinary fellowship could be further developed. Fellows encouraged deepening cohort connections through in-person convenings or peer subgroups. Advisors shared ideas for group orientations and periodic check-ins to delve into what they are learning and how they can best support mentees. Fellows shared professional development ideas for workshops on creative as well as practical themes, further one-on-one guidance from Sundance Institute, and the addition of mediamaker advisors to complement humanities advisors.

Meanwhile, persistent stumbling blocks facing independent mediamakers hindered some fellows from moving forward on their projects during the award year. Such struggles ranged from acquiring needed production funding to recruiting or retaining editors and producers. While temporary interventions can alleviate some difficulties for a period of time, individual fellowships cannot fully counter the system-wide challenges permeating independent media development, production, and dissemination.

Both in academia generally and in the film community there isn't a ton of conversation about how we bring these two together and what it means to bring them together. That's for me the thing that I would love to see come out of a fellowship like this — that the film community and the academic humanities community find ways of allowing overlap for the types of projects that can do that well. And developing methodologies and developing language for people to make those crossovers. But it takes careful consideration of what the crossover means.

— Emelie Mahdavian (panelist), filmmaker and assistant professor,
Film & Media Arts Department, University of Utah

These insights provide rich avenues for further developing unrestricted funding models as well as cross-disciplinary mediamaking mentorships. As creative sectors emerge from the pandemic and funders assess programs initiated during this time, worthwhile questions merit attention:

- How can unrestricted support models balance providing structure as well as freedom for mediamakers to advance complex projects?
- What constitutes success over the course of a single fellowship when both projects and professional growth involve intangible, long-term processes and developments?
- In what ways can funders — individually and collaboratively — advance more sustainable career paths and equitable ecosystems for mediamakers?

Enthusiasm for the Humanities Sustainability Fellowship was clear. While this first iteration of unrestricted funding has concluded, participants offered actionable suggestions for consideration, setting the stage for further experiments and future programs to benefit from valuable insights and learnings.



Kathy Huang, production for *My Uncle the Fugitive*. Photo by Pin-Chih Liao.

HUMANITIES SUSTAINABILITY FELLOWS



Elizabeth Ai
New Wave



Nesa Azimi
DRIVER



Stephanie Black
Untitled project



Shirley Bruno
Fresh/Saltwater Heart
(tentative title)



Zaina Bseiso
Todo Lo Solido



William D. Caballero
TheyDream



Amber Fares
Coexistence, my ass!



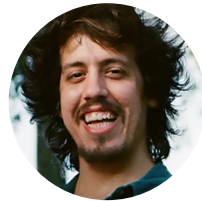
Ro Haber
We Are Pat



Kathy Huang
My Uncle the Fugitive



Immy Humes
Shirley Clark Film -
Untitled



Zack Khalili
Aanikoobijigan
[ancestor/great-grandparent/
great-grandchild]



Jackson Kroopf
The Art of Survival



Marlene McCurtis
Wednesdays in
Mississippi



Christine Mladic Janney
Searching for Nora



Carmen Oquendo-Villar
Todas Las Flores/
All The Flowers



Marlo Poras
The Escape



Ainslee Robson
Kandaka



Tsanavi Spoonhunter
Holder of the Sky



Yuko Torihara
A Revolutionary/Mother



Kevin Wong
Home is a Hotel

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The Sundance Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the discovery and development of independent artists and audiences. Through its programs, the Institute seeks to discover, support, and inspire independent film and media artists from the United States and around the world, and to introduce audiences to their new work.



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