

RESILIENCE AND LEGACY: A study of five Black literary arts organizations



Introduction

Since the 19th century, in the face of multiple barriers to literacy for Black Americans, Black literary arts organizations have fostered the artistic practices and careers of many of the nation's most esteemed writers. Yet these organizations have consistently been underfunded. Five organizations and the research firm Ithaka S+R, a non-profit that provides research and guidance to the arts and higher education sectors, partnered to explore how Black literary organizations have struggled and thrived amid limited resources.

What is the research context?

As noted in the Ithaka S+R study, the literary field operates in a context of scarcity relative to other arts disciplines. These conditions are exacerbated for organizations founded by, for, and with communities of color. Thus, the survival of Black literary arts organizations, they write, is especially difficult, despite the central role the organizations have played in nurturing generations of American literary leaders.

What are the research findings?

The report begins with a brief history of Black literary

Research Approach

The study involved surveying leadership, and interviewing staff, board, audience and community members at five Black literary arts organizations: Cave Canem, Furious Flower Poetry Center, the Hurston/Wright Foundation, Obsidian, and The Watering Hole. Data, along with a literature review, was collected about revenue, expense, governance, and strategy.

associations, noting that between 1828 and 1846 there were at least 56 active literary groups formed to support Black Americans. The New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s saw the launch of several Black-led literary journals such as *The Crisis*, *The Crusader Magazine*, and *Fire!!* The Black Arts movement of the 1960s similarly saw a growth of Black owned publishing houses, journals, and bookstores that provided important platforms for emerging Black writers. These organizations have

Research brief based on [Magnitude and Bond: A Field Study on Black Literary Arts Organizations](#), written by Ithaka S+R.

played a critical role in the history of arts and letters in the United States, particularly because they have operated at a time when many states and communities had made it illegal or inaccessible for Black Americans to learn how to read and write.

Three of the five organizations in the study had, in 2021, annual budgets below \$375,000. One had a budget of \$44,000 and one a budget of \$825,000. Philanthropic donations typically made up less than 20% of organizational revenue, with program revenue and project-based grants making up the rest. While leadership of the literary organizations had a high level of expertise in the literary arts, few had expertise in organizational management issues—financial, legal, and fundraising. Only one of the organizations had a full-time, paid executive director. Two had part time paid Executive Directors (who held other jobs) and two served in a volunteer capacity. None had leadership succession plans in place.

Most of the organizations offered workshops, published literary works, and provided professional development (such as fellowship stipends) to writers. Others hosted retreats, conferences, made mini-grants, or led multi-session courses. The data suggested that programs were both in-person and virtual, but that access (location, timing, cost) remained a critical issue. The

study also noted that the audiences for literary arts organizations include writers and those who appreciate writing, and that ideally public events would be designed for both. The audiences and community members surveyed expressed a degree of reverence for the organizations, who saw their experiences as “horizontal community building,” meaning that they built relationships among a wide variety of writers and fans of writers and writing.

Suggested Brief Citation

The Wallace Foundation. (2025) *Resilience and Legacy: A research brief describing a study of five Black literary arts organizations* led by Harkins and Sweeney. New York: The Wallace Foundation. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-YA7014.001>

Read More

1. [Magnitude and Bond: A Field Study on Black Literary Arts Organizations](#) by Deirdre Harkins and Liam Sweeney.
2. [Sustainability Framework: A Case Study of Cave Canem](#)

Implications for Stakeholders

- **To enhance audience engagement**, organizational leaders may want to consider how programs can cultivate community-building experiences; this could include collaborative work around large scale public festivals.
- **To address gaps in staffing**, organizational leaders could assemble boards with skill sets and/or institutional affiliations that could address gaps in staffing experience.
- **To bolster this part of the arts ecosystem**, funders could support strategic planning and succession planning for smaller, underfunded arts organizations. They could also support community/audience evaluations to help leaders enhance programming.

This study was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations founded by, for, and with communities of color play in the US arts ecosystem. The views summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.