

Turning Pages into Prosperity

The Economic Impact of Iowa's Literary Ecosystem

The Iowa Writers' Workshop—established in 1936 at the University of Iowa—is widely recognized as the first graduate creative writing program in the United States and a global incubator for literary talent. Its presence has catalyzed a dynamic literary and creative ecosystem across Iowa City and Johnson County that boasts festivals, nonprofit initiatives, and cultural institutions collectively driving economic growth, tourism, and a significant portion of the community's identity.

Intellectual Property as Economic Infrastructure

Stories told through oral and written traditions have united communities since the dawn of time. This is why literary works were the original catalyst for copyright protection, as evidenced by the Statute of Anne. Indeed, the founding fathers of the United States deemed these “useful arts” so worthy of protection and cultivation that intellectual property protections were included in Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution. Their foresight was vital, as it has allowed the creative ecosystem to flourish and bolster numerous aspects of the broader American economy.

Building upon that foundation for almost a century, the Iowa Writers' Workshop has helped legitimize creative writing as an academic discipline while producing generations of authors whose work has shaped contemporary literature. Its alumni include more than 40 Pulitzer Prize winners, numerous National Book Award recipients, and several U.S. Poets Laureate. The Workshop's community of directors, faculty, and alumni features many of the most prominent literary voices of the past century, including Paul and Hualing Nih Engle, Lan Samantha Chang, Flannery O'Connor, John Irving, Kurt Vonnegut, Philip Roth, and Marilynne Robinson, reinforcing its central role in shaping both the American and global literary landscapes.

And yet, without U.S. copyright laws protecting their creative stories, books and poems, many of these literary giants would not have been able to support themselves or maintain control over how their writings were published, translated or used by others.



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Expanding the Ecosystem to Drive Global Leadership

Yet, the Workshop's influence extends far beyond the university. It has served as the foundation for a network of affiliated programs including the International Writing Program, the Nonfiction Writing Program, the Iowa Playwrights Workshop, and translation initiatives. These programs have hosted writers from over 160 countries and have produced more than 40 Pulitzer Prize winners, reinforcing Iowa City's status as a global literary hub.

Furthermore, this ecosystem is coordinated and amplified through Iowa City's designation as a UNESCO City of Literature—the first in the United States. The designation recognizes how the Workshop inspired “dozens of creative programs” and community-wide initiatives that connect readers, writers, and audiences through shared cultural experiences.

Measurable Returns for the Regional Economy

The Workshop is a significant part of a broader creative ecosystem in Johnson County that delivers measurable returns for local businesses, workers, and communities. Johnson County's literary culture is made visible through a robust calendar of festivals and public programming that operates in partnership with local bookstores, libraries, cafes, and arts venues, demonstrating a highly integrated creative economy. Among these initiatives are:

- Iowa City Book Festival – An annual weeklong celebration featuring more than 40 free events, including readings, lectures, and cross-sector collaborations with local businesses and arts organizations
- One Book Two Book Children's Literature Festival – A family-focused event promoting literacy and youth engagement
- Paul Engle Prize events – Recognizing global literary figures while connecting international voices to local audiences

According to the Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 (AEP6) study, the county's nonprofit arts and culture sector generated \$32 million in economic activity and supported more than 500 jobs in 2022, underscoring its role as a regional industry rather than a niche cultural asset. In downtown Iowa City alone—where literary programming is highly concentrated—arts organizations from every creative sector and their audiences generated \$20.4 million in activity and 319 jobs, reinforcing the density and productivity of the city's creative core.

Broader Impact of the Creative Ecosystem

Critically, this impact extends well beyond arts institutions themselves. The AEP6 study found that each attendee at an arts or cultural event in Iowa City spends over \$40 per visit beyond the cost of admission, supporting nearby restaurants, retailers, and service providers. Visitors from outside the region make up approximately one-quarter of all attendees, amplifying the sector's role as a driver of tourism and small business growth. These patterns align with broader regional trends showing millions of annual visitors and hundreds of millions in spending tied to the area's cultural assets.

Beyond direct spending, the creative sector strengthens Johnson County's long-term economic competitiveness by attracting talent and investment. AEP6 reports that 89% of attendees view arts and cultural events as a quality-of-life asset and source of community pride, reflecting the sector's role in workforce retention. In a knowledge-driven economy where people often choose communities before jobs, Iowa City's literary ecosystem—led by the Workshop and reinforced by festivals and public programming—provides a powerful model for how creative industries can drive growth, enhance livability, and generate sustained economic impact.

Creative Ecosystems Underpin Strong Economies

The Workshop and its partner initiatives play a meaningful role in driving tourism. In 2024, Johnson County drew 5.1 million visitors and generated over \$458 million in spending—underscoring how cultural programming, including literary events, fuels visitation and economic growth. This local impact sits within a broader context: tourism contributed \$11.2 billion statewide and supported more than 71,000 jobs. The literary ecosystem also strengthens workforce attraction and retention. Arts and cultural amenities are key drivers of where many people choose to live, and in Iowa City, 89% of arts attendees report greater community pride. The Workshop and its affiliates draw highly skilled, creative talent from around the world—individuals who often contribute to local businesses, education, and entrepreneurship well beyond their residencies.

The Iowa Writers' Workshop serves as the cornerstone of a thriving creative ecosystem bolstering the broader economy in Johnson County. Through a network of programs, festivals, and partnerships, it generates significant economic activity while enhancing community identity and global visibility. This integrated model demonstrates how investment in creative industries can yield measurable economic returns while fostering innovation, education, and cultural exchange.