



INDIANA POET LAUREATE REPORT 2022/2023

Research Findings

IN Poet Laureate Report

A comprehensive review of the Poet Laureate program in Indiana and the community's feedback for the growth of the program

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Indiana Poet Laureate

In 2005, Indiana [Senate Bill No. 433](#) established the role of Poet Laureate for the state of Indiana and outlined the process for selecting a Poet Laureate biennially. After more than 15 years of successful programming, the Indiana Arts Commission (IAC) is looking towards the future of the Indiana Poet Laureate program and how to expand its impact in the years ahead.

Review Process

In July 2022, IAC began a comprehensive review of the Poet Laureate program which included three major phases: research, focus groups, and a statewide survey. The following sections of the report will outline the process and findings of each phase.

Executive Summary

The Indiana Poet Laureate program is by design one rooted in community connection. The findings of this report point to some promising areas of expansion through changes in how the program is communicated, how the Poet Laureate is selected, and how the program connects with various communities. These recommended changes build on the program's strong foundation and have the promise of bringing in new community participants, increasing and expanding the program's reach across the state.



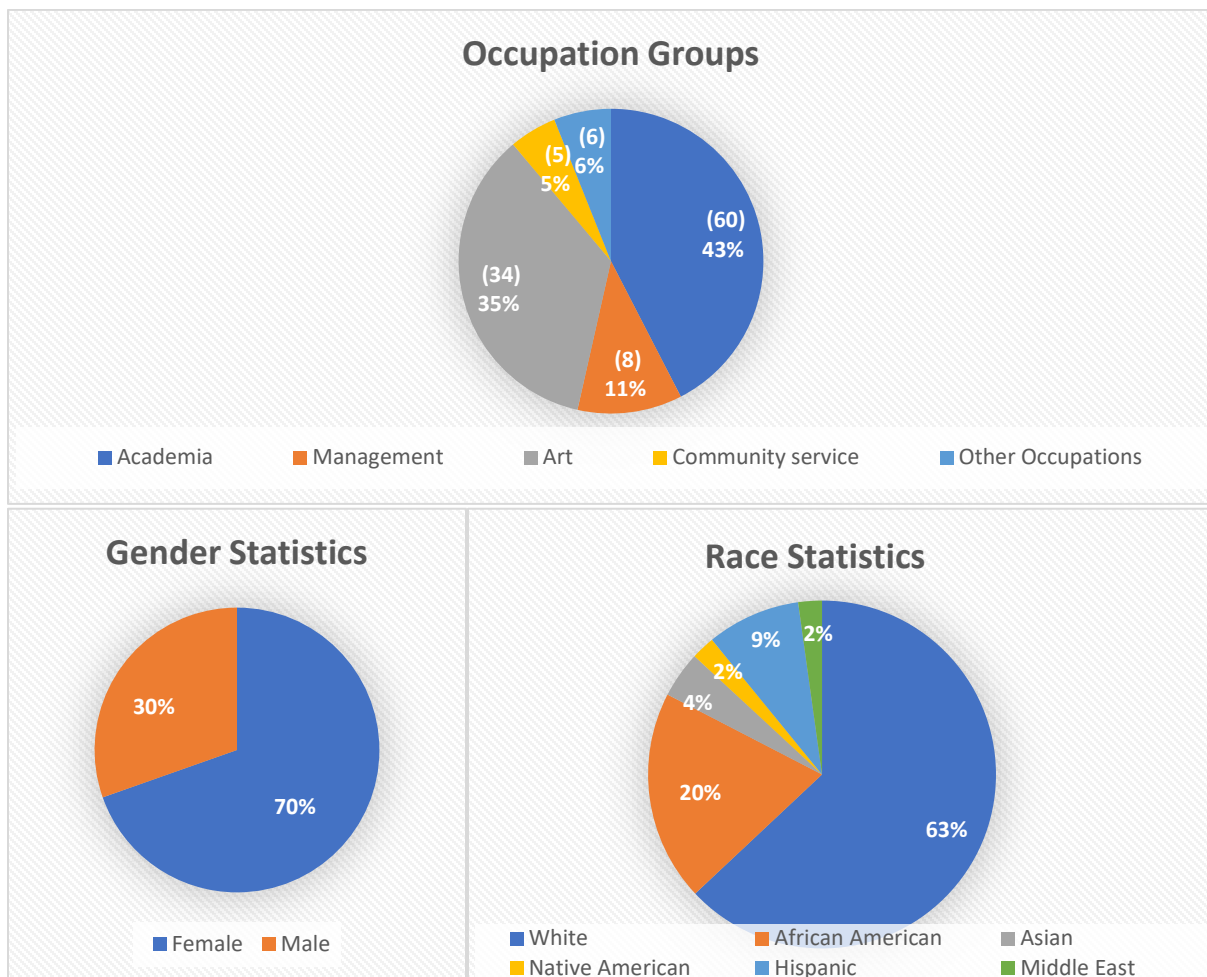
SECTION 1 – National Assessment of State Poet Laureate Programs

National Assessment: State Poet Laureates

In July 2022, IAC began a comprehensive review of national state Poet Laureate programs. Through extensive online research, IAC examined other states' program designs, their current Poet Laureate profiles, and their approach to the position's activities.

Below represents a comprehensive review of state Poet Laureate programs across the United States. There are currently 46 states and Washington D.C. that have a Poet Laureate program, including Indiana (some states' Poet Laureate positions are currently vacant.) Below are some selected findings on who was serving as Poet Laureate across the country at the time of the research.

Makeup of state Poet Laureates





Findings

Nationally, Poet Laureates have diverse backgrounds (although the majority have a background in either art or academia), which suggests the IAC could consider both new ways of outreach for nominations and changes in the nomination and selection processes in order to recruit Poet Laureate candidates with diverse interests and backgrounds.

Next Steps

Following the initial research, the IAC conducted three focus groups comprised of poets/writers and community members from across the state to gather more input. After the focus groups, the Commission sent out a statewide survey. The focus groups took place in August 2022 and the survey was distributed in September 2022.



SECTION 2 – Focus Groups

Poet Laureate 2022: Focus Group Report

Overview

In August 2022, three focus groups were conducted. The below summarizes focus group demographics, design and responses.

Focus Group Participant Demographics

Background	Region	Connection To Poetry	Familiarity with Poet Laureate Program
Professional Poet/Writers: (8)	Northern IN: (5)	Deeply involved in the poetry community: (6)	Very familiar, with the Poet Laureate program (3)
Program/Nonprofit Administrators: (2)	Central IN: (7)	Somewhat involved in the poetry community: (4)	Somewhat familiar with the program: (3)
Librarians: (2)	Southern IN: (4)	Occasionally involved with the poetry community: (5)	Fairly familiar with the program: (3)
Other Arts Professional/Community Member: (4)			Not familiar with the program: (7)

Focus Group Design

The focus groups were comprised of both poet/writers and community members with various backgrounds. They varied in their degree of familiarity with the Poet Laureate program. The focus group discussion was designed around six questions regarding the Poet Laureate, the Poet Laureate selection process, and the community impact of the program.

Below each question is outlined with relevant paraphrased comments from focus group participants.

1. Poetry's Impact on Daily Life

Describe how poetry is a part of your everyday life.

From community members:

- ❖ “I use poetic language anytime I write letters, emails, or sympathy cards. It is in my everyday life. I used to think poetry had to rhyme, but later, I found out it did not have to.”
- ❖ “To me, poetry is a practice that you have to do constantly to keep it. Personally, I find myself mostly on the editing/reviewing side of things. Writing poems is a very cathartic, therapeutic, hope-building process.”
- ❖ “Poetry to me is pervasive. It is everywhere.”

From professional poets/writers:

- ❖ “I perform poetry on a regular basis. Poetry has been a part of my life for 20 years.”
- ❖ “Poetry is part of my spiritual exploration; it is a divine thing.”
- ❖ “I use poetry as an outreach. “

2. Serving the Community

What value do you think the Poet Laureate can bring to your community?

From community members:

- ❖ “Since my community is a small, rural community, I’d like to see Poet Laureate activities and events that are close by, so we don’t have to drive to Indianapolis.”
- ❖ “Where I live almost never has any Poet Laureate visits. The presence of the Poet Laureate can ignite the interest and energy of the residents.”
- ❖ “If the Poet Laureate can have regional partners who are not poets, then they can make some inter-creative connections with the residents.”

From professional poets/writers:

- ❖ “The Poet Laureate can be in direct contact with the youth in my neighborhood. I live in an impoverished area, so it will be great to talk about how poetry relates to mental health. A Poet Laureate should be able to inspire people from my community, especially the youth.”
- ❖ “An appearance in a smaller, out-of-the-way place could help jumpstart a “scene” of poetry in a place that hasn’t had it before. It can be a “lightning bolt” in a region to attract people to a more rural place.”

- ❖ “The Poet Laureate can find ways to help people graduating schools keep making poetry a part of their life. Perhaps starting a small group of poetry critique, writing, or reading for them.”
- ❖ “They can support local writers in places that do not have strong support services. For example, my local arts council only does visual arts work, not literary.”
- ❖ “They can partner with other creatives in other media, to expand poetry’s impact, amplify poetry voices, and can make it more visible and accessible.”
- ❖ “It would be important for them to intersect with non-poetry communities.”

3. Poet Laureate Qualifications

Given the value you mentioned, what qualifications do you think we should be looking for in our state’s Poet Laureate?

From community members:

- ❖ “They should be someone who would be in touch with all the students - who would be approachable. Since the name *Poet Laureate* makes it seem very esteemed and ‘untouchable’.”
- ❖ “I would like to see a candidate who is not necessarily “qualified” be given consideration. So, a high school student or a homeless person who keeps a journal or writes about survival and their experiences in a “poem” or several of them might be a poet. I don’t think the bar should be set so high that it excludes potential talent.”

From professional poets/writers:

- ❖ “They should have a vision of what they want to see happen in Indiana, not just seeking the accolade. They should especially be passionate about their role and responsibilities.”
- ❖ “They should be able to attract and bring in new communities to the poetry world.”
- ❖ “They should have an enthusiasm for poetry. Lots of educators have had the position, but I think enthusiasm trumps teaching. They should be a go-getter, someone who is willing to put in the time, and continue the same tradition of excellence. They should be a listener as well as a speaker. Additionally, someone who can do online work at this point with COVID-19 will be a great candidate.”
- ❖ “Ideally, you want someone who is not necessarily a professional teacher but has experience facilitating a workshop. Someone who knows how to put a book together – knows publishing and can share that information with others – willing to travel – and be a cheerleader for the genre. Someone who has a social media presence or be willing to create one. And they need to be able to spread the message beyond in-person events.”
- ❖ “They must have a certain amount of community involvement, like a couple years of active involvement with communities, specifically the youth. They need to focus on the future. It’s easy to say, ‘I write poetry’ but is your poetry full of emotions/feelings or is it good writing but cold?”

4. Poet Laureate Selection Process

Currently, the Poet Laureate selection committee is comprised of seven representatives from Indiana universities. What would you suggest adding to these processes?

- ❖ “I think we can be open to look outside of Indiana for conflict-free people to be on the committee.”
- ❖ “I think it is important that the committee includes people who represent poetry from the community. They should really be involved in poetry to qualify.”
- ❖ “I think Arts Administrators are potential candidates, such as an Arts Council staff. We can also do polls within poetry groups and ask who they think should be on the committee.”
- ❖ “I second crowdsourcing the selection committee.”

5. Application Materials

What materials do you think are important to ask for in a Poet Laureate application?

From community members:

- ❖ “Maybe a poetry competition can help us find our Poet Laureate.”
- ❖ “I think allowing more creativity in the materials is important in an application.”
- ❖ “It’s important to evaluate the candidate’s vision about what do they want to get out of serving in this role. The vision should include the outcomes they want to achieve for both the community and for their own career.”

From professional poets/writers:

- ❖ “I think the CV limit should be 2 pages.”
- ❖ “The candidate should have 3 recommendations in the application. We can even specify that one of the recommendations has to be in a specific field, for example.”
- ❖ “The application can ask for a video of the candidate reading a poem, their poetry samples either in writing or as a video, and a vision statement of how they want to serve in the role.”
- ❖ “The IAC can help with the application process by hosting webinars and posting them on YouTube about how one can apply for the position. The topics can include ‘How to put a CV together’, ‘How to put a website or social media presence together’, etc.”

6. Outreach and Application Process

What would you suggest in terms of the outreach and application process?

For this question, most answers came from the professional poets/writers.

- ❖ “We can look into ways to open the application to people with videos as well as via CV, etc., considering spoken word artists.”
- ❖ “Since access to the information is where equity starts, it is important that we market the information in new places. I suggest using Instagram ads for outreach.”

Findings & Themes

Below are some themes/recommendations that emerged from focus group participants.

Serving the Community:

- ❖ Make more visits and create more events in rural areas and non-poetry communities
- ❖ Engage more with youth
- ❖ Create groups to support local writers, graduates whose direct poetry involvement at school ended

Poet Laureate Qualifications:

- ❖ Is enthusiastic and passionate about poetry
- ❖ Has done and is willing to do more community engagement, especially with youth/students
- ❖ Non-traditional poets should be considered
- ❖ Has a good vision for how they will serve in the role
- ❖ Has or is willing to build a good social media presence
- ❖ Is willing to travel to places, especially rural areas

Poet Laureate Legislation:

- ❖ Selection committee should include people who are actively involved in poetry communities
- ❖ Crowdsource the committee by getting inputs from the statewide poetry community

Application Materials:

- ❖ Video submission
- ❖ Vision statement/explanation on how they will serve in the role
- ❖ A shorter CV
- ❖ Three (or some) recommendations
- ❖ Allow for a more creative approach

Outreach and Application Process:

- ❖ Use social media to increase outreach
- ❖ Let people apply through various formats



Miscellaneous:

- ❖ The IAC should strengthen program goals and provide clarity around expected outcomes



SECTION 3 – Statewide Survey

Poet Laureate Survey Analysis

Background

In September 2022, the IAC conducted a statewide survey around the Poet Laureate program.

Respondents Overview

Target respondents were those who had a personal investment in poetry - “interested in poetry in Indiana” — with 45% of respondents being writers and/or employed in the literary field.

The survey was promoted through weekly newsletters and online social media over a three-week timespan. Thirty-seven respondents participated from across the state.

Regional Representation

24 out of 92 Indiana counties were represented and all IAC service regions except Region 9 (Columbus area).

Poet Laureate Program Awareness

25% of survey respondents had little or no knowledge of the Poet Laureate program.

● Never heard of it before today	6
● Have heard a little about it	3
● I know what it is, but not the details	12
● I know a lot about it	16



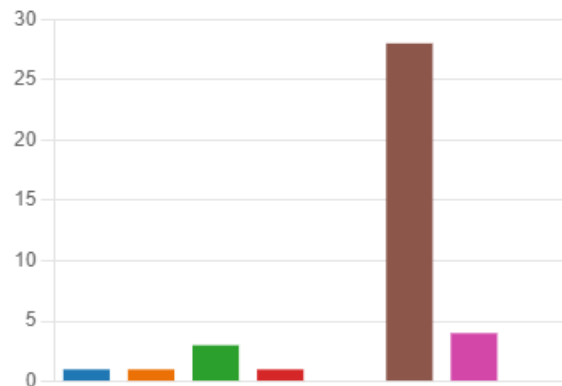
42% of respondents had never attended an event that included the Poet Laureate or were not sure if they had.



Respondent Demographics

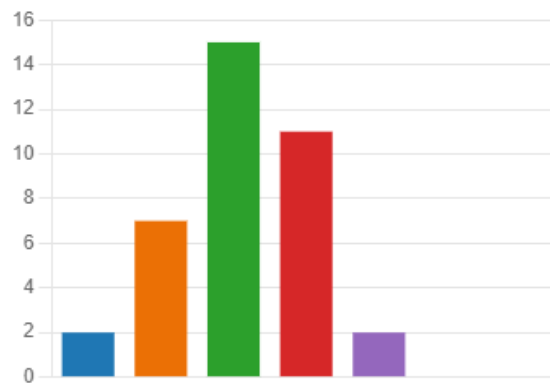
Race/Ethnicity Demographics

● American Indian/Alaska Native	1
● Asian	1
● Black/African American	3
● Hispanic/Latinx	1
● Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Is...	0
● White	28
● I prefer not to say	4
● Other	0

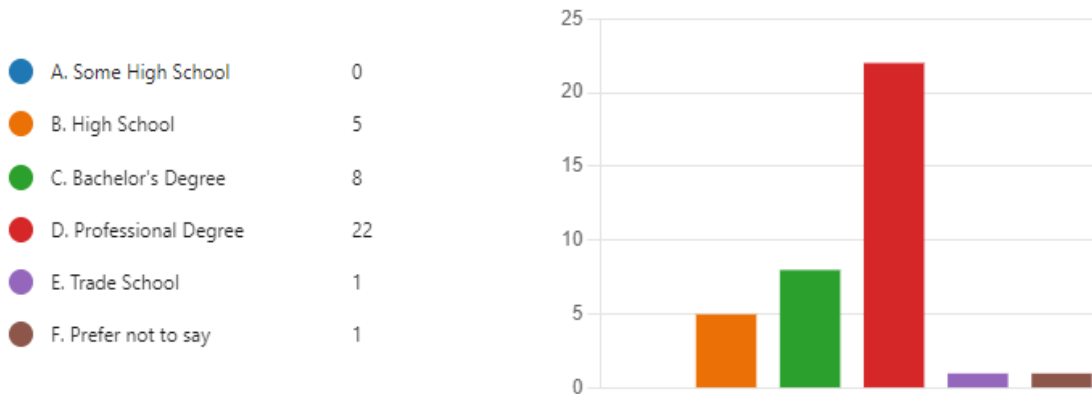


Birth Year/ Age Demographic

● 1940 or earlier	2
● 1941-1950	7
● 1951-1970	15
● 1971-1990	11
● 1991-2010	2
● 2011 - present	0
● I prefer not to say	0



Highest level of Education Completed



Suggestions on the Qualifications & Selection of Poet Laureate

- ❖ Everyone agreed: education level attained was not the most important qualifier when finding a Poet Laureate. Also low in importance was occupation, age, and accomplishments.
- ❖ Several responses desired a Poet Laureate who would help create and connect a poetry community throughout the state.
- ❖ Respondents did not identify diversity (e.g., geography, age, racial) as a priority.
- ❖ Respondents did not seem to be interested in using CV's, resumes, or advanced academic degrees to determine candidates for the role.

When asked the question, "When you hear the words "Indiana Poet Laureate" what immediately pops into your head?"

59% of respondents gave an answer that indicated that they **thought of the Poet Laureate as a representative of Indiana who brings poetry into the community through presentations and/or education.**

27% of respondents signified that, to them, **the Poet Laureate is a talented and distinguished poet**, with some answers indicating a lean towards seeing the Poet Laureate as a high-achieving academic.

When asked the question “Which characteristic (1. A passion for the role to serve the state, 2. Geographic diversity, 3. Racial diversity, 4. Specialty/Expertise, 5. Age Diversity 6. Accomplishments/ Awards 7. Occupation, 8. Education) of a Poet Laureate is most important to you?”

56.8% of respondents’ first choice was “A passion for the role to serve the state” which was the highest percentage of first choice votes and **24.3% of respondents’ last choice was “Education (e.g., hold a certain degree level),”** which was the highest percentage of 8th choice votes. The rest of the six options were vastly skewed in importance level to participants, however, geographic and racial diversity scored lower than expected.

When asked the question “To you, what qualifications are most important to require of a Poet Laureate applicant?”

The top three choices were “A vision of how they wish to serve in the role” with **48.6% of respondents** ranking that as their first choice, “A letter explaining why they or the person being nominated are the best fit,” with **24.3% of participants** choosing that as their first choice, and “Professional poetry and/or literary work” with **18.9% of respondents** choosing that as their first choice. **The bottom three choices were** “Full CV” with **18.9% of respondents** choosing that as their last choice, “Website link with poetry experience” with **32.4% of respondents** choosing that as their last choice, and “other literary samples” with **24.3% of respondents** choosing that as their last choice.

When asked “What activities could the Poet Laureate do that would be most beneficial to your community?”

The top two choices were “Spend time celebrating and supporting the current Indiana poetry community,” with **35.1% of respondents** ranking that as their first choice and “spend time creating new initiatives and innovative events about poetry,” with **32.4% of respondents** ranking that as their first choice. **The bottom two choices were** “Spending time mentoring other poets,” with **24.3% of respondents** ranking that as their last choice

and “Spend time in rural parts of the state,” with **24.3% of respondents** ranking that as their last choice. The remaining choices had skewed ranking, however there seemed to be a higher ranking on choices that directly highlighted aspects of community engagement and fortifying a literary community in Indiana.

When asked about the kinds of events that would be beneficial to their communities:

Respondents gave high ranks in all areas, **showing the perceived importance of school visits, library visits and poetry readings by the Poet Laureate.**

When asked “What other activities would you like the future Poet Laureate to do across the state and/or in your community?”

35.1% of respondents wrote answers that indicated an interest in a Poet Laureate hosting **community events or workshops**, **16.2% of respondents** wrote answers that indicated the desire for the Poet Laureate to create opportunities for **Hoosiers to be published** or share their poetry with others, and **13.5% of respondents** wrote answers that indicated the interest in the Poet Laureate to **broaden the scope of Indiana poetry** in a way that brings in other disciplines and/or encourages Hoosiers who aren’t as interested in poetry to engage with this art form.



CLOSING SECTION - FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Recommendations for the Indiana Poet Laureate Program

Based on the information gathered, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Ensure that the communications surrounding the Poet Laureate are more robust, allowing for more widespread knowledge of the program.
2. Redevelop the application and selection process to align with the needs the respondents feel the Poet Laureate should fulfill (e.g., a vision for how they wish to serve the state, more community engagement, and building and connecting the poetry community in the state).
3. Revise the application guidelines to coincide with the field's priorities (e.g., less emphasis on education and CVs, more emphasis on the actual work of the poet and their vision to serve the state).

Conclusion

The Indiana Poet Laureate program has a strong history of providing creative service and inspiration to the residents of Indiana. The IAC has done a comprehensive review of the program and created recommendations that stand to significantly increase the reach and impact of the program.

The IAC thanks all the community participants who guided this research.

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