

The Critical Funding Gap for Boundary-Crossing Scholars and Writers

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Executive Summary

The Kiang Foundation is well positioned to occupy a narrow but underfunded space: modest, flexible support for students, emerging scholars, and writers whose work connects disciplines, methods, geographies, or communities. Public and institutional funding systems tend to be field-specific, tuition-centered, or award-driven; they often do not cover the small but decisive expenses that make boundary-crossing work possible: conference presentation, travel, materials, fieldwork, time to finish, and access to residency time.

The quantitative evidence points to three funding gaps. First, graduate support is uneven by program type. In national 2019-20 NCES data, 43.0% of graduate students received grants, 12.0% received assistantships, and 42.2% used loans; master's students were especially exposed, with only 5.7% receiving assistantships and 45.5% using loans [1]. Second, in fields directly relevant to Kiang Foundation — English, comparative literature, literary studies, criticism, and creative writing—conference registration is often intentionally modest, but total attendance costs can still exceed \$1,000 once travel, lodging, meals, and membership are included [6-11]. Third, writer residencies are capacity-constrained and often leave indirect costs uncovered even when tuition, room, or board are subsidized; Artist Communities Alliance explicitly notes that residencies impose direct and indirect costs such as transportation, materials, foregone income, and maintaining a home while away [14].

For Kiang Foundation, the practical implication is clear: a \$1,000-\$2,500 award can be meaningful when targeted to expenses that existing systems routinely miss. The Foundation can define its funding thesis around “catalytic marginal support”: flexible awards that unlock presentation, cross-community engagement, research mobility, and protected creative time for people whose work does not fit neatly into a single disciplinary pipeline.

What the Data Shows

Program area	Observed gap	Quantitative signal	Kiang Foundation opportunity
Interdisciplinary scholarships	Small non-tuition costs and cross-field work often fall outside standard aid categories.	Only 43.0% of grad students received grants; 42.2% used loans; master's students had low assistantship access at 5.7% [1].	Offer flexible \$1,000-\$2,500 awards for materials, fieldwork, collaboration, completion, and conference presentation.
Professional presentation	Registration is often manageable; lodging, travel, meals, and membership create the real access gap.	Reduced/student registration examples range from about \$70 to \$145 across MLA, AWP, ALA, CEA, and ALSCW; ACLA travel grants are \$400 and not guaranteed [6-11].	Fund the last-mile gap between institutional/ association support and actual travel/presentation cost.
Writer residencies	Fully funded, fee-free, or stipend-supported residency slots are scarce and competitive.	Yaddo hosted 239 guests in 2024; Hedgebrook invites about 80 writers per year; elite residency benchmarks can be highly selective [15-18].	Support unpublished or interdisciplinary writers with travel, living-cost, childcare/ caregiver, or residency-completion awards.
Public arts funding	Macroeconomic public funding is volatile and not primarily designed around individual emerging writers.	State arts agency appropriations fell from FY2023 to FY2026; individual artist support remains a limited share of public arts funding [23-26].	Provide private, donor-backed continuity in a volatile public funding environment.

Gap 1 — Interdisciplinary Scholarship: Funding Exists, But It Is Not Built for the Margins

The strongest national dataset for graduate aid is the NCES National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. NPSAS:20 represented about 3.6 million graduate students enrolled at Title IV-eligible institutions in 2019-20 and measured grants, assistantships, employer aid, loans, and other aid [1]. It does not isolate “interdisciplinary” students as a separate category; therefore, the most defensible way to quantify the gap is to examine broad graduate funding patterns and identify where interdisciplinary work is likely to fall between existing funding channels.

In the NCES data, 73.9% of graduate students received some aid, 43.0% received grants, 12.0% received any graduate assistantship, and 42.2% used student loans. The program differences are material: doctoral research/ scholarship students had much higher assistantship access (40.4%) and much lower loan use (19.1%) than master’s students, whose assistantship access was 5.7% and loan use was 45.5% [1].

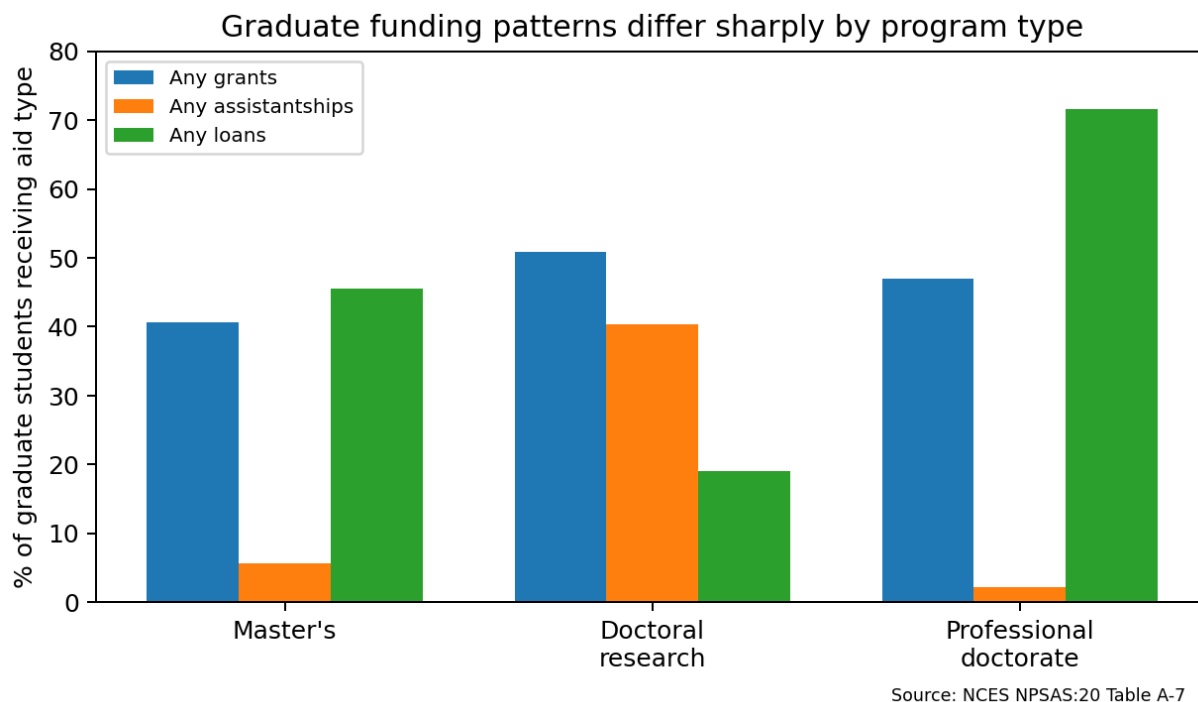


Figure 1. Graduate aid receipt by program type. Source: NCES NPSAS:20, Table A-7 [1].

This matters for Kiang Foundation because interdisciplinary and cross-community work often requires costs that standard institutional aid does not prioritize: travel to a partner community, materials from another discipline, conference presentation outside the home department, language or translation support, archival access, field documentation, or time to complete a public-facing output.

Large national funders do support interdisciplinary work, but their scope does not eliminate the gap. NSF explicitly considers proposals in “single, multi-, cross-, trans- and inter-disciplinary” STEM fields, and the GRFP supports thousands of fellows nationally [3-4]. But those programs are highly structured, often field-limited, and not designed to cover the flexible micro-costs of humanities-centered, cross-community, or creative-scholarship projects. Kiang Foundation can therefore complement, rather than duplicate, major national funding.

Gap 2 — Professional Presentation: The Conference Gap Is Concrete and Fundable

Conference presentation is a particularly strong use case for Kiang Foundation because the value proposition is visible: a student, emerging scholar, or writer has already produced work strong enough to be accepted, but the cost of presenting can still prevent participation. For Kiang Foundation’s target fields, the best evidence base is a basket of English, comparative literature, literary studies, criticism, and creative-writing conferences.

In these fields, the registration fee itself is often intentionally modest. Conferences are not unusually expensive at the registration line item. In fact, they are often meaningfully cheaper than large professional or scientific meetings. The funding problem is therefore not that these conferences are over-priced; it is that even relatively modest registration fees become unaffordable when added to membership requirements, travel, lodging, meals, local transportation, and unpaid time away from work.

ACLA is especially aligned with Kiang Foundation's interdisciplinary thesis. Its 2026 travel grants are offered in the amount of \$400, are restricted to paper presenters, and are explicitly not guaranteed because demand exceeds available allocation; the association states that it is particularly interested in helping students and contingent faculty without institutional support [7]. This is direct evidence of field-specific need: the association itself recognizes the access problem, but its grant pool is limited.

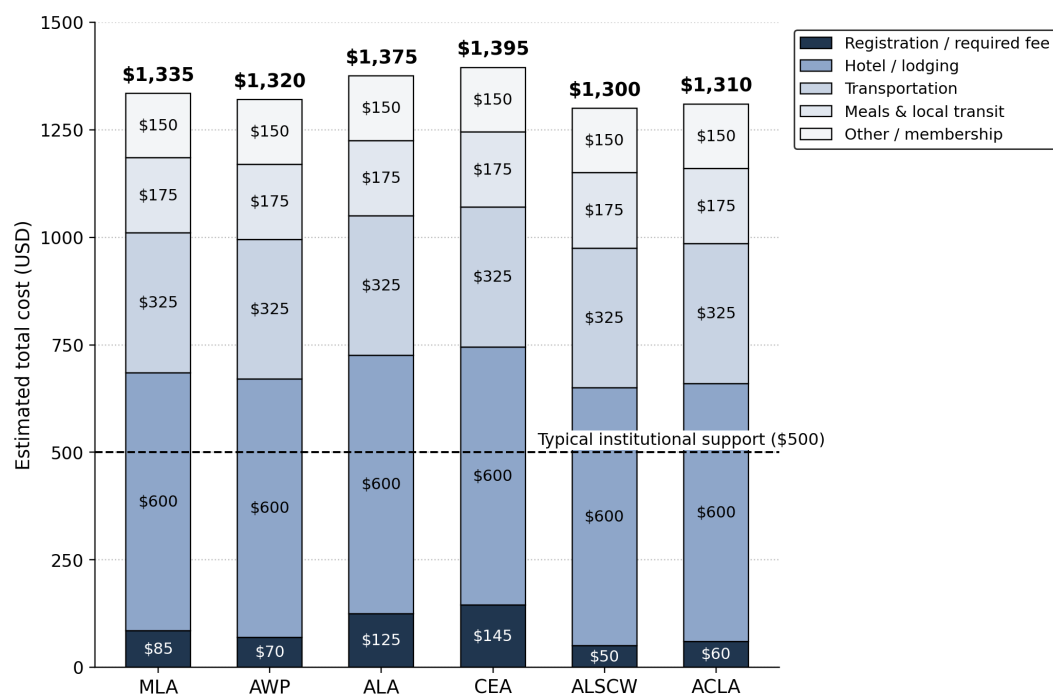
Conference / organization	Relevant fee or support data	What it shows	Source
MLA	2027 student member: \$75 early / \$85 regular / \$90 late; student nonmember: \$120-\$130.	Student registration is low, but presenters still face travel and lodging costs.	[6]
ACLA	2026 travel grants: \$400; paper presenters only; not guaranteed because requests exceed funding.	Direct evidence of a field-specific access gap.	[7]
AWP	2025 college/university student registration: \$65 early / \$70 preregistration / \$155 onsite.	Creative-writing conference access is not solved by low student registration alone.	[8]
ALA	2026 fee: \$175 standard; \$125 graduate student / independent scholar / retired faculty; hotel rate \$189/night before taxes.	Hotel cost can exceed registration several times over.	[9]
CEA	2026 registration: \$145 graduate students; presenters must be members of CEA or SALA.	Teaching/scholarship-oriented English work still requires membership and travel.	[10]
ALSCW	2025 registration: \$100 graduate students; \$175 under \$65,000 income; \$200 regular; \$250 with institutional support.	Literary scholars, critics, and writers are explicitly segmented by ability to pay.	[11]

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The stronger funding-gap argument is therefore not that English and literary conferences have unusually high registration fees. The gap is the mismatch between modest-but-real registration and membership costs and the much larger cost stack created by transportation, lodging, meals, and time away from work. Using a conservative domestic model-registration/membership of about \$125, three hotel nights at roughly \$189 plus taxes and fees, domestic transportation of \$250-\$500, and meals/local transit of \$150-\$250-a presenter can easily face total costs of roughly \$1,000-\$1,600. ACLA's \$400 grant and common institutional caps may help, but they often leave a remaining gap of roughly \$500-\$1,000.

Conference Presentation Cost Benchmark in English, Literary, and Writing Fields

Shared non-registration cost assumptions across conferences; total cost varies by conference fee



Registration / required fees are specific to each conference (MLA \$85, AWP \$70, ALA \$125, CEA \$145, ALSCW \$50, ACLA \$60).

Shared non-registration cost assumptions across all conferences: hotel/lodging \$600, transportation \$325, meals & local transit \$175, other/membership \$150.

Figure 2 : Conference presentation cost benchmark with shared non-registration cost assumptions and a single typical institutional support line.

Source note: Registration fee figures reflect the conference-specific values used in the Kiang Foundation white paper; all other cost categories are shared assumptions for illustrative comparison.

For Kiang Foundation, this is attractive because the problem is concrete and fundable. A \$750-\$1,500 Presentation Access Grant could be designed to cover the missing increment after institutional support, with priority for graduate students, independent scholars, contingent faculty, unpublished writers, and interdisciplinary presenters whose work falls outside a single department's conventional conference list.

Gap 3 — Writer Residencies: The Gap Is Not Just Admission; It Is Affordability of Time

Writer residencies appear “free” when room, board, or studio space are provided, but the real affordability question is broader. Artist Communities Alliance cautions that any residency has costs to the individual, including meals, materials, transportation, loss of income, and maintaining a home while away [14]. For unpublished writers and interdisciplinary writers, the barriers are compounded: fewer credentials, fewer discipline-specific fellowships, and less ability to absorb unpaid time away from work or caregiving.

Capacity is visibly scarce. Yaddo’s 2024 annual report states that it hosted 239 guests in residence for 5,679 guest days, with an average residency length of 24 days; it also notes that demand for residencies has reached “unprecedented levels” [15]. Hedgebrook’s Writers in Residence program invites approximately 80 writers for residencies of two to four weeks [16]. Published practitioner guidance cites competitive residencies such as Yaddo or MacDowell as accepting roughly 10%-20% of applicants, and cites the Fine Arts Work Center benchmark of 1,100 applicants for 18 spots, or about 1.6% [17]. Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference reported that for 2025 it accepted 20% of paying participant applicants and 3% of applicants for financial aid, illustrating how the financial-aid pool can be substantially more competitive than the paid-admission pool [18].

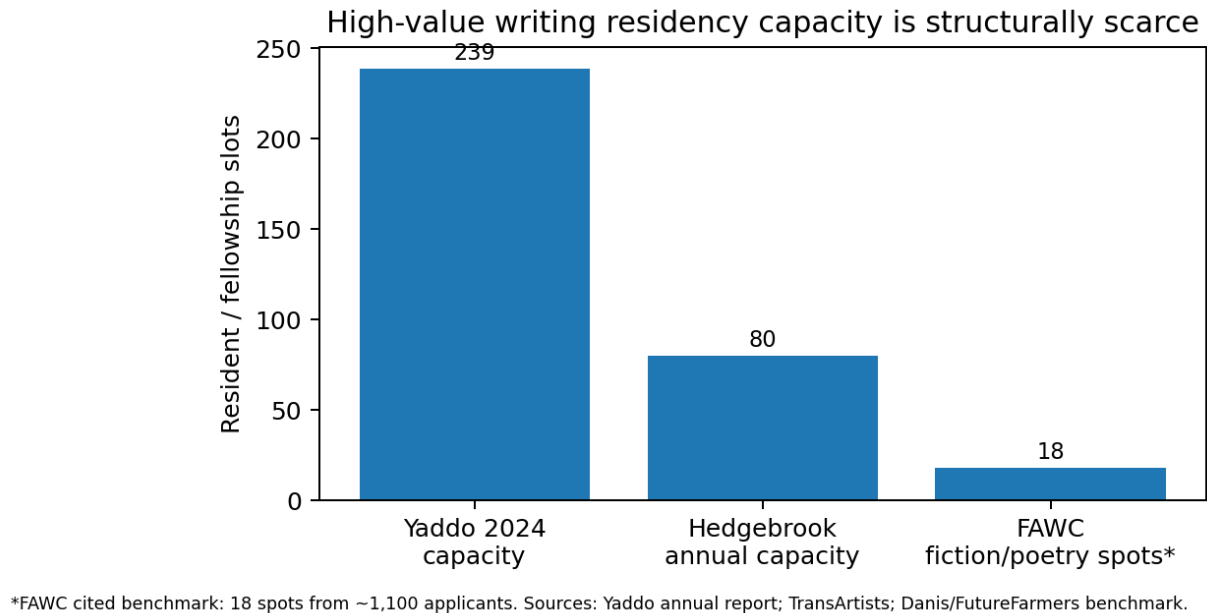


Figure 3. Residency capacity benchmarks. These are not directly comparable programs, but together they show scarcity in high-value writing time [15-17].

Specific gap for unpublished and interdisciplinary writers

The unpublished-writer gap is partly eligibility-based. Many prestigious opportunities define “emerging” as not yet having a published book, but these programs are narrow and highly competitive. The Center for Fiction, for example, defines an emerging writer as someone who has not yet had a novel or short story collection published by a major or independent publisher and is not under contract for such a work [19]. This is aligned with Kiang Foundation’s thesis: promising work can exist before conventional publication credentials and may need targeted support before it becomes legible to mainstream funders.

The interdisciplinary-writer gap is also program-design based. General artist residencies may support multiple disciplines, but selection categories still often map to conventional fields such as literature, visual art, music, film, and performance. Writers working across science, community history, design, research, memoir, documentary practice, or public humanities may not fit cleanly into a literary-only or academic-only funding category. Kiang Foundation can address this with a clear criterion: support writing projects that connect domains, methods, or communities and that have a plausible public-benefit pathway.

Macro Trends in Reinforce Gaps

The macro funding environment reinforces Kiang Foundation’s case for flexible, privately funded awards. Across arts, humanities, graduate education, and creative practice, there is money in the system, but the money is often volatile, institutionally routed, restricted to organizations rather than individuals, or too large and competitive to solve small access barriers. Kiang Foundation’s opportunity is not to replace public arts agencies, universities, or major fellowships; it is to operate in the practical funding layer those systems routinely miss.

Trend 1: Public arts funding is moving down from pandemic-era highs.

[Arts Midwest, summarizing NASAA data, reported that state arts agency legislative appropriations totaled \$971 million in FY2023 and \$755 million in FY2024 [22]. NASAA’s FY2025 report put FY2025 state and jurisdictional arts agency legislative appropriations at \$694.3 million, an 8.1% decrease from FY2024 and a per-capita decline to \$2.02 [23]. Arts Midwest’s 2026 summary reported \$646 million in FY2026, a further 5.9% decrease from FY2025 [24]. This is not a collapse of public arts funding, but it is a clear normalization away from high pandemic-era funding levels.

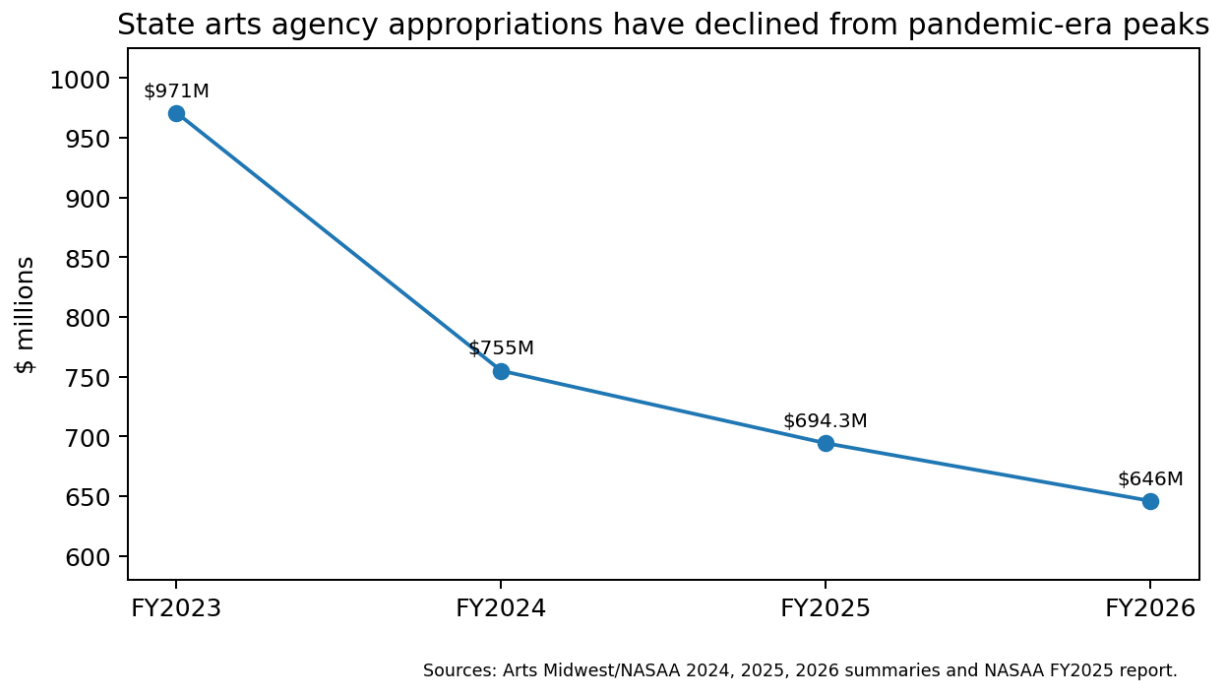


Figure 4. State arts agency appropriations, FY2023-FY2026. Public arts funding remains meaningful but has declined from pandemic-era peaks [22-24].

Trend 2: The decline is uneven, which creates geographic inequity.

NASAA notes that aggregate changes can be driven by a few large-budget states and line-item appropriations, while base funding may move differently from total appropriations [23-24]. For recipients, this means access depends heavily on where they live, where they study, and whether their work is eligible for a state or local program. A national or donor-funded private award can reduce this geographic lottery by attaching support to the person and project rather than to a state budget cycle.

Trend 3: Federal arts funding is important but not designed to meet individual last-mile needs.

Grantmakers in the Arts reported that the National Endowment for the Arts received a \$207 million appropriation in FY2025, flat from FY2024, and estimated combined federal, state, and local public arts funding at \$1.68 billion in FY2025 [25]. The NEA also describes Grants for Arts Projects as funding arts projects across disciplines including literary arts, multidisciplinary works, and local arts agencies [28]. This scale matters for the ecosystem, but most federal dollars are not microgrants for an individual graduate student's conference trip, an unpublished writer's residency travel, or a cross-disciplinary materials gap.

Trend 4: Individual artist support remains a comparatively small channel.

Grantmakers in the Arts/NASAA analysis has reported that state arts agencies invested almost \$7 million in grants to individual artists and that individual-artist grants represented about 3% of all state arts agency grants and 11%-13% of grant dollars over the prior decade [26]. Some states provide meaningful unrestricted individual grants—Mass Cultural Council, for example, describes Grants for Creative Individuals as unrestricted \$5,000 awards to Massachusetts artists, culture bearers, and creative practitioners [27]. But these programs are competitive, geographically bounded, and not necessarily focused on unpublished writers, graduate students, or interdisciplinary literary work.

Trend 5: Graduate aid remains structurally mismatched to interdisciplinary work.

NCES data show that aid is widespread but not necessarily flexible: 42.2% of graduate students used loans and only 12.0% received assistantships in 2019-20 [1]. Assistantships, tuition remission, PI grants, and departmental travel funds are often tied to a home discipline, a specific lab, or a conventional professional-development pathway. A student whose work spans English and public health, comparative literature and migration studies, architecture and community history, or creative nonfiction and science communication can fall between those budget lines.

Trend 6: Affordability problems are increasingly about time, mobility, and indirect cost rather than only tuition.

The Kiang Foundation funding thesis should therefore avoid framing need too narrowly. For conference presenters, registration can be less than \$150 while hotel and travel dominate the total cost. For writers, a residency can be nominally funded while still imposing transportation, unpaid leave, caregiving, and housing carry-costs. For interdisciplinary scholars, the missing amount may be a research trip, a small software or translation expense, or the cost of bringing a project into a community setting.

Trend 7: The most durable philanthropic niche is flexible, adjudicated, low-friction support.

The funding environment favors a public charity that can make awards quickly, require a clear but simple use case, and measure practical outputs without imposing the administrative burden of a major grant. Kiang Foundation can be particularly credible if it requires applicants to show the specific gap, the boundary-crossing nature of the work, and the public or scholarly value unlocked by a modest award.

Implication for Kiang Foundation: the Foundation should present itself as a precision funder. The macro system funds institutions, large programs, and conventional categories; Kiang Foundation funds the catalytic margin. That positioning is factual, donor-legible, and aligned with the Foundation's mission: to back work that connects adjacent fields, methods, and communities when the existing funding architecture is too rigid or too uneven to do so reliably.

Conclusion — Proposed Kiang Foundation Funding and Metrics

The Kiang Foundation could avoid positioning itself as a replacement for tuition aid, federal grants, major fellowships, or large residencies. Its strongest and most differentiated position is catalytic marginal support: relatively small, flexible awards that unlock work already in motion but blocked by a specific gap.

Award type	Typical amount	Eligible uses	Why it fits the gap
Interdisciplinary Student Scholarship	\$1,000 initial award; later \$2,500-\$5,000 tiers	Research materials, fieldwork, community engagement, translation, travel, completion support.	Targets small non-tuition costs not reliably covered by graduate aid.
Presentation Access Grant	\$750-\$1,500	Conference registration, airfare, lodging, poster production, accessibility needs, virtual presentation fees.	Covers the common last-mile gap when institutional or association support falls short.
Unpublished Writer Residency Support	\$1,000-\$3,000	Travel, lost wages, childcare/ caregiver costs, housing carry-costs, materials, application costs.	Makes “free” residencies affordable for writers without flexible income.
Interdisciplinary Writing Fellowship	\$2,500-\$10,000 over time	Protected writing time for projects connecting disciplines, communities, methods, or public knowledge.	Fills a niche between literary awards and academic fellowships.

To remain rigorous and donor-credible, Kiang Foundation could track outcomes that align with its theory of change, without overburdening recipients.

- Access unlocked: number of conferences, residencies, community visits, archives, or field sites made possible.
- Output advanced: papers presented, manuscripts completed, portfolios advanced, public talks delivered, collaborations formed.
- Boundary-crossing quality: disciplines, methods, geographies, or communities connected by the supported work.
- Equity and stage: first-generation status, unpublished status, emerging-scholar status, institutional access, or other self-reported barriers, collected only as optional and privacy-respecting data.
- Leverage: other funding attracted after Kiang Foundation support, such as departmental match, conference grant, residency acceptance, publication, or fellowship.

Important Caveats and Data Limits

There is no single national dataset that measures “interdisciplinary scholarship funding gaps” across all disciplines. This paper therefore triangulates from graduate aid data, field-specific conference fees, association travel-grant language, institutional funding structures, residency capacity, and arts-funding trends.

Conference costs vary by location, duration, distance, timing, and presenter status. This revised draft avoids using medical or STEM conference-cost studies as a proxy for English and literary fields. Instead, it uses current or recent fee schedules from MLA, AWP, ALA, CEA, ALSCW, and ACLA; the all-in cost model is labeled illustrative because lodging and travel vary by attendee.

Residency acceptance rates are often not publicly reported. Where direct program data are unavailable, this paper uses published program capacity and publicly cited selectivity benchmarks and labels them accordingly.

Public arts funding data does not map directly to writer residencies, but it provides context for volatility and the relatively limited share of public funding that reaches individual artists.

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