Chairs and Council Members Peer Session Notes

October 25, 2024

Coordinators

Shari Hofschire, Chair, Nebraska Arts Council

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Approximately 45 state arts agency (SAA) chairs and council members attended the peer session (see roster). The agenda featured time with NASAA Legislative Counsel Isaac Brown and small-group conversations.

Notes from Roundtable Conversations

Working with Your Statewide Advocacy Group

This conversation explored how state arts agencies can collaborate with statewide advocacy groups to increase the number of voices speaking effectively for the arts. Representatives from these agencies participated in this discussion:

- Because Alabama does not have a separate advocacy group, the **Alabama State Council on the Arts** and its council members do the advocating themselves, working with legislators to maintain and increase the overall budget.
- The **Illinois Arts Council** (IAC) has had an on-again, off-again working relationship with Arts Alliance Illinois (AAI), the state's advocacy group. In the past two years, IAC undertook a full review of programs and policies, resulting in an overhaul that shifted the agency from a discipline focus to a regional approach that now better serves the entire state (thanks also in part to an equity analysis conducted with NASAA). IAC implemented changes that simplified opportunities for organizations (no limit on size of budget), artists and communities; streamlined the application process; and improved transparency on the formula with no more panel reviews using a reader model. Once these changes were implemented, IAC began working with AAI to increase support for the budget, and were successful with a $7.5 million

increase. IAC and AAI meet regularly on policy issues for the creative sector and to develop a whole-government approach to working with other state agencies.

- Some councilors of the **Maryland State Arts Council** also serve on the board of Maryland Citizens for the Arts, to work together to advocate for budgets and other issues. This overlap and coordination is key to a successful working relationship.
- The **Michigan Arts and Culture Council** has a complicated relationship with advocacy groups, as there have been three different organizations over the years and no centralized partner. The larger urban areas have a strong presence, and the Creative State Report is very helpful regionally and with cities. A new Cultural Advocacy Network just started in 2024 and includes museums, libraries, historic sites and preservation, presenters, and others. The arts council has moved away from the panel system for grant reviews.
- The **Minnesota State Arts Board** (MSAB) has a close working relationship with Minnesota Citizens for the Arts (MCA), participating in every board meeting to provide updates. MSAB and MCA work collaboratively with the state's regional arts councils as key partners to reach the entire state. MSAB's budget comes from a dedicated revenue tax. MCA's work on advocacy ensures that local voices are included and that advocacy efforts include the whole state, from urban to rural communities. MCA has been intentional about adding board members from under-represented communities, most recently adding a Native American board member.
- The **Ohio Arts Council** (OAC) has various levels of partnership with its citizen advocacy organization. OAC board members have good relationships directly with legislators, as the governor directly appoints the members.
- The chair of the **South Dakota Arts Council** (SDAC) serves on the board of Arts South Dakota (ASD), the statewide advocacy group, which results in a strong working relationship that partners on policy and programming. SDAC is funded by a dedicated tourism tax, which has protected the agency across different administrations and agendas. SDAC and ASD host a joint statewide meeting once a year. SDAC is also moving away from a panel review system for its grants.
- The **Wyoming Arts Council** (WAC) works closely with the Wyoming Arts Alliance (WAA) to drive home the economic impact of the creative sector (with the help of many arts-supporting governors). This may be more challenging in the future if the state gets more conservative. WAC and WAA work closely with legislators to represent the state's 23 counties.

Overall, most states are working with or in different levels of partnership with their state advocacy groups. The discussion illuminated the benefits of various relationships and offered many helpful lessons learned.

Being an Effective Champion for Your Agency

What's the best way to connect with your congressional delegation? With your mayor or city council? With local businesses? With people whose views are different from yours? This conversation explored effective approaches and messages for building relationships with various stakeholders. People brought their own examples and questions to this discussion about our unique roles in building support and awareness for the arts and our agencies.

Representatives from Arkansas, Georgia, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin and Wyoming participated in this discussion:

- It's a struggle communicating the importance of the arts to local government.
- Am I a nonprofit executive or a council member? It takes time to learn which hat I'm wearing.
- Wear the "state" hat to support local municipalities by supporting and advocating for local policies.
- Prioritize underserved communities as a primary talking point.
- Invite legislators to programs funded by the state arts agency.
- Create one-pagers of economic impact AND stories/local case studies.
- Communicate urgency.
- Convene the full state arts agency and full statewide advocacy group board for joint meetings to coordinate and communicate actual needs.
- Provide a comprehensive, in-depth orientation for new council members.
- Try to get current and former legislators appointed as council members.

Polarization: Surviving and Healing

Polarization impacts many aspects of our agencies' work and the work of the artists and arts organizations we support—everything from grant making to panel adjudication to how exhibitions and performances are curated and marketed to art making itself. This conversation considered how polarization affects state arts agencies' work and strategies for managing it. We also explored the role of arts and culture in bridging divides by helping people connect, understand and empathize with each other.

States participating in this conversation included: California, Hawai‘i, Louisiana, Montana, South Carolina and Utah. These challenges were discussed:

- The state has control over terms and cutting of budgets (not the agency).
- When a new governor came in, the entire arts council changed, and so did the mindset. We should represent the entirety of the state, regardless of party.
- As appointees, our boards can change depending on outcomes of elections and party affiliations.
- Language of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) can't include any specific cultures.
- Some states can't use DEI at all—can't use the language, can't engage practices.
- State law reduced the number of board members, which reduces the variety of perspectives and opinions.
- Top issue becomes "defend your dollars"—lots of battles with state lawmakers.
- We need support from certain supportive lawmakers to fight for dollars.
- Arts agency always has to be under the radar because of conservative governors.
- Legislators are getting more involved, which politicizes more issues.
- Fear of change, based on changes in state leadership.

What can help?

- Arts and culture can heal and bring people together.
- Make changes to the arts awards, to share them more with the community.
- Share more widely what we're doing, including with legislators.
- Visit other places.
- Make grants to county or area arts councils to extend our reach.
- Advocate for education money for more arts education.
- We are everywhere, we serve everyone—we should be meeting everywhere, in every region of our state.

Leadership Transitions

Whether it's the routine transition of newly appointed council members or the departure of your agency's executive leadership, council members play an important role in guiding our agencies through leadership changes.

Representatives from California, Maryland, Missouri and Rhode Island explored strategies for stewarding agencies in times of transition. The group discussed three levels/kinds of transition: council membership, council leadership and agency staff leadership. Some issues, concerns and questions that arose include:

- How best to onboard/orient people as quickly and effectively as possible? What kinds of processes can most effectively orient people, and also transfer knowledge and experience?
- It's important to clarify and understand the partnership between staff and council members. Who has what power? Who controls the budget? Who evaluates, bolsters and/or understands staff capacities?
- There can be wide-ranging challenges with culture change when a new executive director (ED) comes in after a long-time ED leaves.
- EDs often have no say in council appointments and council transitions (tough for those new EDs who are used to being involved with who comes onto their boards).
- Arts agencies are often subject to general state law, which can frustrate new EDs who come to public service from the private or nonprofit sector.
- Council efficiency and effectiveness can face challenges regarding open meeting laws. How to use the executive committee as a tool?
- Connect with other states to learn more about best practices for partnership with other agencies and with advocacy groups.
- Council transitions can be supported by mentor/mentee relationships.
- Council members can support transitions by being knowledgeable about and cheerleaders for their agency programs and initiatives.
- Advocacy and policy committees can help over time to inform legislation that clarifies issues, such as how agency budgets are approved, relationships with advocacy groups, legislative line items, lobbying roles, length of grant cycles, fundraising and policies that benefit the arts (such as revenue from athletes and entertainers, license plates, etc.).

When Disaster Strikes

Unexpected circumstances can cause devastating loss for communities and the organizations that serve them. These situations can range from severe weather to technology failure to violence. This conversation explored how state arts agencies can prepare for adversity and be ready to step into action. Table participants included Alabama, Alaska, Guam, Idaho and West Virginia.

Keeping in mind our roles as council members and our focus on supporting and guiding the work of the agency in partnership with its staff:

- Internally, we can focus on infrastructure, policy, resources, funding and training.
- Externally, we can focus on infrastructure, relationship building, policy, resources and visibility.
- Are we asking the right questions? Are we advocating for resources?
- Areas of opportunity include adding to the strategic plan, e.g., how are we building budgets with recovery and relief/response in mind?
- Don't feel compelled to reinvent the wheel. Reach out to other state agencies and get connected inside state government. For example:
    - In Guam, they know what to do when an earthquake happens. Planning and preparation is ongoing and ingrained.
    - Example: Everyone had to create pandemic plans, dust them off and make updates to include known risks and "all hazard" planning
- Support the county and local arts agencies in your state with disaster planning, relief, and response but most importantly, recovery.
- Can we include mental health in strategies going forward?
- As funders, make disaster related planning eligible for capacity building and technical assistance.
- As funders, make response and recovery projects eligible for project funding.
- How do we continue to prepare for the unpredictable and how do we get better educated in the things we can expect? What is our role in supporting education building?

NASAA Resources for Council Members

The For Council Members section of NASAA's website has excellent tools and resources designed to help chairs and council members in your unique roles:

- About State Arts Agencies provides a great overview of what state arts agencies are, why they were established, and all the incredible things they do to promote the arts and reduce barriers to cultural participation.
- The Federal-State Partnership in the Arts Policy Brief describes the partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts, state arts agencies and regional arts organizations. The partnership is essential to the health of our country's arts ecosystem—understanding its impact will help you demonstrate its value to your state and federal lawmakers.
- Citizen Councils outlines common council duties to help you understand the difference between serving on the board of a public agency versus a nonprofit.
- This Narrative and Messaging Guide shows you how to make a case for public support of the arts as a core necessity. Its recommendations originate from extensive message testing and research on the values that motivate elected officials.