



Grants and Fiscal Officers Peer Group Session Notes

October 24, 2025

To Panel or Not to Panel? Panel/Review Processes: Trends, Changes and Challenges

Panel discussion on different application review and scoring structures/strategies and accompanying outcomes. Q&A/open discussion followed on state-specific challenges and accomplishments in application evaluation and scoring.

Presenters

Jeff Garrett, Program Manager & ADA/504 Coordinator, Michigan Arts and Culture Council

Mollie Flanagan, Artist Programs Director, Rhode Island State Council on the Arts

Thomas Tran, Grants Director, Oklahoma Arts Council

Thomas Tran shared **Oklahoma's** experience with grant panels. Full panel reviews are conducted on applications for large and medium awards under \$20,000 and \$5,000, respectively. Small awards under \$2,000 undergo an expedited staff review without full panels. Applications are scored on artistic quality and merit and how they meet agency priorities. Comments and feedback are welcome. The whole process is subject to open public records. The advantages of using panels include engagement with the community, transparency, public input and feedback. Using panels also protects the agency. The disadvantages include the difficulty in recruiting panelists, the quality of the feedback, time consumption and strain on staff capacity. Oklahoma is thinking of ways to improve the process, including revisiting language in applications, redefining core grant programs and eligibility, addressing staff workloads, revising scoring rubrics and award amounts, and commitments to accountability. They will keep using panels for transparency and community engagement.

Mollie Flanagan shared **Rhode Island's** experiences with grant panels. Rhode Island uses panels of 5 people reading up to 30 applications. They make all the funding decisions. The panelists are recruited with an eye toward diversity and receive training in logistics and implicit bias. Applications are scored on community impact, feasibility and artistic merit. The advantages of using panels are the involvement of the arts community, robust feedback for applicants and providing a layer of protection for the agency. The disadvantages of using panels include the large amount of staff time and money necessary to support panels, the dependency on panel makeup and the lingering possibility of bias. Rhode Island is thinking of ways to improve the panel process by having panelists evaluate and meet remotely from home, scoring on a four-point scale across three criteria, and having the highest scores go into a weighted lottery.

Jeff Garrett shared **Michigan's** experiences on doing away with grant panels. Michigan simplified the application process to eliminate application fees, reduce cash match, eliminate complicated budget worksheets and shorten the length of narratives, among other improvements. Panels were done away with, so staff review all applications. They found that much staff time previously devoted to administering panels has been freed up to address other services grantees want, such as professional development, etc. The change has been seen by staff as positive so far.

Breakout: Capacity Strategies for Grants and Fiscal Officers

Participants divided themselves into groups to discuss workflow and operational strategies. Topics could include application structure, panelist payment/training, regranting, regional grants administration, use of AI or related technologies, and more.

Coordinators

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