

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

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State of the State Arts Agencies

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I usually begin my CEO report by trying to clarify the key trends in the environment of state arts agencies that affect our ability to carry out our collective mission, our mission to broaden, deepen and diversify participation in the arts. This year, we are overwhelmed by the spectre of federal dysfunction. History will look back at our generation as the people who learned what a gap there can be between the ideal values of American democracy and the political institutions that are supposed to deliver those values. When I say the ideal values of American democracy, I am talking about the freedom and ability of individuals to make important life choices, such as profession, level of education, leisure time activities, style of retirement; about the ability of government to find consensus in such policy areas as education, immigration, health care, and energy; about the public and private sectors working together to produce a profitable economy for investors and workers; about freedom of belief; and always about providing a future better than the past or present. These are American ideals.

They are bumping up against the consequences of some of our political habits—ironically, habits that are grounded in our cherished values of free speech and a minimally regulated marketplace. If we continue our habits of designing electoral districts as part of a spoils system, of allowing party primaries to be referendums on oaths of pure doctrine rather than on ability to apply principles, negotiate and govern, if we finance campaigns and purchase media as relatively unregulated markets, and if we accept low voter turnout as the norm, and all this at the same time that the digital revolution is shortening our collective attention span, we will find ourselves downstream in the electoral process, being governed by individuals who have little allegiance to a thoughtful, negotiated, mainstream mix of popular solutions to problems.

Our political institutions are resulting in a Congress that is more polarized than the general population. Seventy-eight percent feel government is going in the wrong direction; only 14% feel government is going in the right direction. Sixty percent would elect ALL new members of Congress, including their own.

Let me point out here that the reflective and innovative capacity of American society to deal with its political system and the preservation of democracy, while it needs to be informed by accurate data and reliable research, will be deeply

dependent on the political studies, history and philosophy; on the study of values, symbolism and metaphor; on communication, psychology and sociology—all the skills and understandings we call the humanities. They must be dispersed among us, within us, so that we are enriched by options from diverse perspectives. The form and function of American democracy will also be deeply dependent on our collective sensory, visionary, theatrical, architectural, environmental and design-based competencies, our sense of place and public space, the balance of our capacities for self-expression and empathy, the way we perceive and moderate the connections between our thoughts and the emotions that move us to action—all the skills and understandings we call the arts. They, too, must be dispersed among us and within us, so that we are enriched by options from diverse perspectives.

I'm not minimizing the importance of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. I'm saying that the education necessary to preserve the values of democracy is deeper and broader than college and career preparation. And the arts and the humanities are as important in that education as the sciences. And it's supremely headed in the wrong direction to suggest that American education policy should be guided by the salary that graduates with a given major make in the marketplace.

Each year, as part of my performance review, the NASAA board advises me to communicate as simply as possible. I am trying.

Coming through and now coming out of the serious recession that began in 2008, the hallmarks of state arts agency leadership have been relentless focus on the mission of broadening and deepening participation in the arts, adaptation of core programs, demonstration of contribution to jobs and the economy, and innovative initiatives. If what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, you are the Incredible Hulks of state government.

Even as you have sustained a commitment to using 40% of your funds for general operating support—the kind of support most valued by your constituents—and a third of your resources for arts education, you have become masters of the catalytic use of small grants and small project budgets to leverage big impacts. I'm talking about programs like job creation grants of \$1,000 to \$10,000, training programs for community scholars, production of diversity toolkits, \$3,000 grants for place-based community and economic development projects, webinar series, \$250 grants for accessibility interpreters, grants of \$750 to \$7,500 to enable active military service members to participate in the arts, creative economy and creative arts industries grants, grants that promote arts programs in libraries, \$500 grants to assist artists to implement business or marketing plans, publication and distribution of a first novel, the activities of state poets laureate, state musicians, state two- and three-dimensional artists.

These programs depend upon a level of staff professionalism and management ability that staggers the imagination.

Throughout the nation, state arts agencies are initiating reflective, strategic gatherings to integrate arts participation in the community and economic development of their state. In the Rhode Island Arts Charrette, the governor, house and senate presidents and more than 100 business and government leaders met to review a white paper on Economic Development of the Arts and to brainstorm how the state can become "the state of the arts." The Indiana, Michigan and Ohio state arts agencies and several foundations partnered to operate a three-state consortium on the arts and community change. The Florida Division of Cultural Affairs used grant-writing workshops to connect the arts and environmental conservation. Pennsylvania formed a new bipartisan, bicameral arts and cultural caucus in its general assembly. Sunset reviews in Texas and Arizona became forums on the future cultural life of the state. In-person convenings and website upgrades are creating public spaces for cultural dialogue, such as the new on-line arts HUB in South Carolina, Artsadvantage.com in Nebraska and onestateillinois.com. New creative economy reports and the meetings to discuss their implications and next steps abound.

State arts agencies continue to foster new approaches to advancing arts education. Among many examples, California explores a turnaround schools initiative, and Alaska, following an arts education assessment, initiates a project to demonstrate high-quality arts education in three communities.

The state arts agency movement continues. Though many state economies are improving and state arts agency budgets recaptured \$20 million last year and \$30 million this year, once again totaling more than \$300 million from state legislatures, the revenue, political and arts participation environments continue to change.

In the future, public support for the arts at the state level may take even more diverse forms than now.

In some states, chronically limited state resources may prompt a primary focus on catalyzing local arts agencies, organizations and activities.

Cross-sector initiatives fostering for-profit, not-for-profit, and pro-am collaborations may be the norm in some states.

In more states, the commercial value proposition of job creation, work-force development and creative economy may drive public arts support.

In other states, the cultural imperatives of new demographic constituencies—majority minorities, aging cohorts, influxes related to new industries—may shape new arts priorities.

Certainly, state arts leaders will continue to operate as policy entrepreneurs, taking advantage of trends in other, better funded areas of government—health, economic development, education.

The role of state arts agencies in facilitating the ability of artists and arts organizations to integrate successfully arts participation through live, real-time, on-line and portable experiences will become increasingly important.

In any case, as state arts agencies reposition themselves and adapt, NASAA's role as a learning community is and will be as important to its membership as ever.

I can't tell you how meaningful it has been for NASAA staff to experience the contributions of NASAA members to the campaign for NASAA that more than matched the \$50,000 challenge grant from the Windgate Foundation. Above and beyond the state dues investment, this individual giving sent us messages every day that our work was appreciated at a deep, personal level, that the people we admire and serve feel the same way about us. On behalf of NASAA's staff, I thank you and applaud you. I also want to report to you that John Brown, CEO of the Windgate Foundation, met with NASAA's board of directors here in Jackson earlier this week, asked us to share with him examples of how state arts agencies are achieving advocacy successes and launching effective programs, and, at the same time as he handed us the challenge grant check, invited a conversation about what should be the next step in our relationship.

NASAA members must not be distracted by the theatrics of a government shutdown, or even by the question of raising the debt ceiling. Our mission is to strengthen state arts agencies, and a 49% cut to the National Endowment for the Arts, the most recent budget action voted on by the House Interior Appropriations subcommittee, is not consistent with our mission. Sooner or later, the continuing resolutions that have sustained federal agency operations for the past three years will come to an end, members of Congress will grapple with individual agency budget levels; we have relationships with these men and women to cultivate, and we have hearts and minds to win on behalf of the value of public support for the arts.

Each year, at our annual NASAA gathering, I can feel my energy being replenished, my knowledge broadened and deepened, and my focus clarified by your commitment to public service, your use of the arts to provide public benefits, your diverse and constructive creativity no matter how difficult the challenges.

I thank [Montana Arts Council Executive Director] Arni Fishbaugh for being such a joy to work with as NASAA president. I look forward with pleasure to the presidency of my friend [Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism Assistant Secretary] Pam Breaux. I thank NASAA's Executive Committee, board, committees and advisory groups, and each of you for the work you do and for your support of NASAA. Please join me in acknowledging once again NASAA's spectacular staff. [Applause.] As I complete this report, I thank you all for the life you allow me to lead as the CEO of NASAA.