

Chair and Council Member Peer Session Report

NASAA Assembly 2008, September 11-13

Submitted by Laura Smith

Emcee: Susan Landis, Chair, West Virginia Commission on the Arts

Participants: Forty-five people participated in the Chair and Council Member Peer Session. See the [peer group roster](#) for the full registration list.

Thursday, September 11, 2008

Presenters: NEA Chairman Dana Gioia and Senior Deputy Chairman Eileen Mason
NASAA Legislative Counsel Tom Birch

Dana Gioia and Eileen Mason spoke about accomplishments of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and why they matter to state arts agencies and to the nation.

Eileen began by reviewing some of the people, policies, and programs that have contributed to the NEA's successes since 2001. She acknowledged several important hires the NEA has made, including that of Patrice Walker Powell, the new deputy chairman for states, regions and local arts agencies. Eileen also warmly recognized the NEA's most important partners: the 56 state and jurisdictional arts councils, the 6 regional arts organizations and the NASAA staff, who bring the entire field together. She noted in particular the success of Poetry Out Loud, a major NEA national initiative that would not have happened without the partnership and goodwill of the states.

Eileen briefly summarized the NEA's signature programs—Shakespeare in American Communities, Poetry Out Loud, NEA Jazz Masters, American Masterpieces, and The Big Read. She then recapped several important policy changes since 2003, including:

- A return to **discipline-based applications**, which make it easier for artists and arts organizations to apply for funding and for panelists to adjudicate applications;
- The simplification and **streamlining of the state and regional partnership agreements**, which allow greater flexibility in the use of federal funds;
- Inclusion of domestic indemnity in the **Federal Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Program**, which makes it possible for museums to indemnify transportation and exhibition costs from collections around the country;
- Ensuring, through **Challenge America**, that arts organizations in each congressional district have received at least one NEA grant;
- Instituting the **NEA Opera Honors**, which expands awards and recognition given to individual artists; and
- Concerted efforts to publicize major research reports, including "Reading at Risk," "The Arts and Civic Engagement," "To Read or Not to Read," and "Artists in the Workforce."

Through all these efforts, Eileen noted, the NEA has extended the reach of the arts to every corner of the country; forged closer, more productive relationships with its state and regional partners; garnered strong bipartisan support from Congress to the tune of \$144.7 million dollars in 2008 (the largest increase in 28 years); and

regained the confidence of the Congress and the public in the NEA. Today, the NEA is irrefutably a preeminent cultural institution poised to grow and prosper.

Dana Gioia said the NEA works on behalf of the transformative power of artistic experiences to help human beings realize their fullest and best potential—a powerful and compelling rationale for why the arts are so essential to a robust and thriving democracy. As he prepares to leave the NEA to spend more time on his poetry, he reflected that this is a good time for the arts because of the widespread recognition of the arts as fundamental to American **social life**. He also noted that arts organizations are foundational civic entities and as such are central to a comprehensive vision of a successful commonwealth and American **civic life**. The arts are also important in American **economic life**, as noted in the NEA report "Artists in the Workforce."

Dana emphasized that the arts are a critical dimension of **education** in America. The dearth of arts education in public schools remains a problem, especially since it does so much to address the high drop-out rate by helping students stay in school. To that end, Dana lauded the Tennessee Arts Commission for its Value Plus Schools program, an arts education reform model that is focused on arts integration across all subjects. Overall, NEA programs today are helping to create social capital, a key goal of the agency.

Please see the [2008 Elections Update](#) from Tom Birch that outlines each of the presidential candidates' records and platforms.

Saturday, September 11, 2008

Participants reconvened on Saturday morning for topical roundtable discussions. Below are topic descriptions and notes from each discussion.

- 1. Council Cohesion:** How do we build a strong, unified and highly engaged council team? What can we do to help orient new council members to the purpose and work of our agencies? How can we strengthen everyone's involvement over time?

Facilitator: Diane Dalto, Chair, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts

The group identified the following challenges to creating a strong, cohesive team:

- Political differences
- Different agendas
- Needs of tenured council members are different from those of new members.
- Relationship between the chair and executive director influences the culture of the council—for better or for worse.
- "Difficult" council members, i.e., people who monopolize discussion, don't participate, don't attend council meetings, or who work on behalf of pet projects
- Differences inherent in geographic representation—issues of equity and involvement
- Statutory requirements and term limits

The group brainstormed the following solutions:

Orientation

- Help new council members understand and support the mission of the agency and of the state as a whole.
- Invest in quality orientation—set aside at least a half day with the agency director and staff, current chair and council members to help orient new council members (Maryland State Arts Council does this).
- When possible (or necessary) conduct one-on-one orientations.
- Make sure that art is part of every meeting (Kentucky Arts Council does this).

Relationships

- Conduct an annual retreat (Maryland is a good model).
- Begin cultivating relationships at key transition points, e.g., when there is a new governor (the Pennsylvania Arts Council is a good resource here).
- Work with both current and new council members.
- Understand and address the different needs of longtime council members vs. new ones.
- Be respectful of political differences—reinforce messages about the bipartisan nature of the arts.
- Build social time into council meetings, i.e., schedule a dinner or a group outing to an arts event—encourage council members to get to know each other and learn to think of themselves as a cohort with common ground and common purpose (Pennsylvania is a good resource here).
- Encourage a team approach to advocacy (Kentucky focuses on this).
- Hold meetings throughout the state.

Communications

- Focus on consensus—encourage bipartisan agreement and decision-making
- Establish and clearly communicate shared goals
- Provide information about participation and expectations, including terms and budget information
- Be respectful of everyone's time and perspective—make sure all voices are heard and considered
- Confront "difficult" council members, either individually or assign a peer council member to address challenges

- 2. Council Member-Constituent Relations:** How can we as council members foster positive relationships between our state arts agencies and the grantees and arts communities in our states? What are our roles as spokespeople, ambassadors, listeners, communicators and trend-spotters? How can we prevent conflicts of interest?

Facilitator: Bruce Richardson, Chair, Wyoming Arts Council

The group identified the following suggestions:

- Establish an ambassador program that helps chairs engage with constituents (the Maryland State Arts Council has a good outreach program).
- Strongly encourage council members to attend council meetings.
- Create opportunities for council members to be invited to grantee events—grantees love this and it formalizes a commissioner's introduction to a constituent.

- Have the executive director send letters introducing council members to grantees.
- Have board members report on their activities at council meetings.
- Have regional meetings that are attended by all agency council and staff members.
- Regularly reorient council members to the work of the agency, review what is new with the council, and ask for feedback.
- Support grantee organizations by attending their board meetings.

There was consensus that **a high-impact strategy for council members is to network among the boards of grantee organizations:** get to know grantees, attend their board meetings, attend their events, share what's new with the arts council and communicate about the needs of the state's cultural communities.

In addition, when council members attend grantee events, make sure that they (council members) are publicly introduced and thanked for grant support from the state arts agency. This can help address the widespread concern that state arts agencies and funding from them are an entitlement and too often taken for granted.

Other ideas for fostering positive relationships included:

- Write to legislators to help educate them and make the case for greater funding.
- Encourage council members to proactively seek out arts organizations in their regions.
- Give council members specific assignments, such as:
 - assigning commissioners an artist or an arts organization and ask them to report back at a council meeting;
 - asking commissioners to bring a work of art from a grantee to the next council meeting and discuss it.
 Both of these suggestions are good for large states whose council members are widely scattered.
- Use board meetings for outreach by inviting legislators, congressional candidates, journalists, opinion makers, and school board members to attend.

The **ongoing education and training** of council members is important to people's success in their roles as spokespeople, ambassadors and trend-spotters. Ideas for board education include:

- Institutionalize board education—make it a priority on council meeting agendas.
- Bring in relevant speakers, e.g., governance experts and chambers of commerce.
- Arm council members with the latest information on trends and issues.
- Develop toolkits for council members.
- Include a grantee performance or exhibition in every meeting.
- Dedicate time every year to conduct site visits to grantees.
- Encourage interaction between agency staff and council members—it helps council members to know more about various staff responsibilities and areas of expertise.
- Use council members on panels.

Statement about **conflicts of interest:** Council members who serve on the boards of an organization being considered for funding, or who are in any way involved with a current or potential grantee, should recuse themselves from the decision-making process.

- 3. Leveraging Other Resources:** How can we use our leadership and influence as state arts agency council members to encourage investment in the arts in our state—not just in our agencies—from private sources and other levels of government?

Facilitator: Dennis Kavanaugh, Former Chair, Arizona Commission on the Arts

Council members are busy people who are involved in many activities, different organizations and causes. In addition to our service with our state arts agencies, we volunteer with other groups; serve on other boards, both nonprofit and corporate; hold elected offices; and participate in various professional networks. In every council, there are layers of networking that have the potential to affect the health and vitality of our agencies and of the arts in our states. There is an inherent multiplier effect—the more strategically we tap into all of our networks, the more doors we might open to encourage widespread investment in the arts in our states. Some strategies for doing so include:

- Inventory council members about other roles/boards/networks.
- Identify talents and interests on your council and play to peoples' strengths.
- Maintain relationships with former council members.
- Make presentations about the arts and cultural needs of our states to other groups.
- Use public value concepts as a way to systematically educate and manage council members (very successful in New Jersey).

Other ideas for using our leadership and influence to encourage arts investments:

- Cultivate relationships with journalists and editors.
- Write op-ed articles on the public value of the arts investment.
- Develop key collaborations, e.g., partner with state departments of education on arts education initiatives; chambers of commerce on economic development issues; etc.
- Know the issues and challenges facing local arts councils.
- Engage with school boards about arts education.
- Work with legislative arts caucuses.
- Develop messages that help people understand at the local level how the arts are a public benefit (not just "art is good").
- Remember that all relationships are important – engage *everyone!*

Other ideas for generating new or additional dollars for the arts include:

- Companion foundations
- Cultural trusts or endowments
- Tax credit programs
- Specialty license plate programs
- Lotteries

- Community foundations—important to get to know them because they have similar roles to state arts agencies, e.g., funding, communicating, networking and providing technical assistance
- Reach out to other grant-makers—not just in the arts, but also those working on policy issues that are important in your state (work force development, health care, rural economic development, creative economy, etc.)

See NASAA's [State Arts Agency Supplemental Funding Strategies](#) Policy Brief for more information on special mechanisms that supplement support from general funds.