



Executive Director Peer Session Notes

Thursday, October 14

Positioning State Arts Agencies in a Changing Environment

Facilitators: Theresa Colvin (MD) and Llewellyn Crain (KS)

How Is Our Environment Changing?

- State budget crises
- State arts agency budget reductions
- State arts agency personnel reductions
- Pressure to restructure or streamline state agencies
- Constant legislative turnover and loss of seasoned legislative leadership
- Departments of education are focused on testing and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), so the arts are being squeezed out.
- Declines in arts education are reducing the number of voters and policy leaders having a memorable connection to or experience of the arts.
- State arts agencies are being tapped to do different things (special events, etc.) without resources being allocated for those activities or for the artists involved.
- Budget gaps drive a lot of discussion about "essential" services.
- There is a bigger conversation under way about the role of public money and of government in America, and state arts agencies are caught in that conflict.
- Intensifying political polarization makes productive arguments and advocacy tactics difficult to develop and implement.
- After a 15-20 year trend of investing in facilities, there is now a field expectation that the public sector will also assist with programming and management costs, but those funds are not forthcoming and the recession has complicated that.
- Changing patterns of arts participation have led to a diffusion of arts venues and constituencies as well as change (and sometimes entrenchment) among grantees.

How Have Our Agencies Changed?

Two-thirds of the executive directors gathered in Austin indicated that their agencies had undergone significant or dramatic change. Adaptations included:

- Getting much more assertive about communications, promotion of the arts and promotion of the state arts agency (AZ)
- Reconfiguring staff to address new programs and/or reapportioning the work of staff that have been lost (multiple states)
- The current budget climate has presented us with an enormous opportunity to shift our emphasis away from grants—a shift that has been difficult to make in the past but is easier to manage with an external catalyst. (ID)
- The recession has provided a good window of attention for advancing creative economy arguments that wouldn't have received as much attention in boom times. We've made a lot of progress in that area. (NC)

- The media is changing and we're losing newspapers and arts journalism. This has given us an opportunity to write our own stories. Media outlets are using our material because they have lost staff and are hungry for good content. (MS)
- Cuts in budget and personnel have called the question about our core values. We're now focusing on three core values: *clarity* (asking more questions), *relevance* (to changing conditions, populations and state policy), and *accountability*, which really resonates with authorizers. (UT)
- We're adding a fourth core value—tangibility—by running programs that visibly embody the popularity of the arts and what the agency and the arts do for communities. (VT)
- A big challenge is how to develop the capacity and authority to do things other than grant making. We need new expertise. (WA)

Who Are Our Authorizers?

- Those who control resources:
 - governors and their administrations
 - the legislature/general assembly
 - taxpayers
 - the NEA
 - our councils
- Budget officers are increasingly important.
- We're having more contact with personnel offices and unions due to cuts and restructuring.
- The media that shapes public opinion/perception.
- Local school leaders don't control state arts agency budgets but they do control something we care a lot about: arts instructional time and staffing.
- Less than half of the executive directors in the room have been asked to supply numbers to prove their value to the economy and tourism. State arts agencies are the ones pushing that information more often than it is requested.
- We are being asked for numbers like economic impact, reading scores, math scores, etc. But a lot of those indicators aren't necessarily the things we state arts agencies got into this business for or can directly affect. What authorizers want isn't necessarily meaningful to them or to us. (DE)

How Are Our Political Management Strategies Changing?

- Return on investment (ROI) is the legislative mantra. We are only targeting legislators on the finance committee because we cannot reach everyone. One-on-one contact is still the most effective strategy. Political management is an inescapable part of this job. (MT)
- ROI is easier to demonstrate when you are a fraction of a fraction of a percent of the state budget. We are making the case that a modest investment yields a lot. (RI)
- Dealing with detractors isn't the only issue. Helping our supporters is increasingly hard, too, because of increased polarization among our authorizers. We have a supportive representative whose district is half "teabaggers" and half liberals. She wants to know what to say in a district like that and it's hard to craft a message that will play with her voters. (WA)
- Preservation of traditions is a message that is resonating well with more conservative individuals and "values" candidates in our state. (ID)
- We don't bother any more with those that are not supportive. Every year someone calls for our agency's elimination. That's an extreme viewpoint we have always had

to deal with and we counter it by concentrating on legislators who will support us and reinforcing that support as the norm or the middle path. (TX)

- Staying on top of the "churn" is our primary strategy. We need to constantly educate and re-educate legislators to keep up with the turnover that is caused by term limits. (OH)
- Advocacy for the state arts agency is now on the state chamber of commerce's top-10 advocacy list. The chair of a local arts council knew the leadership and helped to get their buy-in. Conveying our messages from the local level up often is more influential for us. (AK)
- To respond to cutbacks in arts education, we are experimenting with new advocacy strategies. There are too many education units for the state arts agency to do that ourselves, so we are developing a constituent network to get it done. We are cultivating local arts agencies to quarterback arts education advocacy at the local level. (SC)
- We've stopped trying to change the attitudes of our authorizers. Now it's our agency and our clients that need to change, not the legislature. We are now asking grantees to be in leadership roles in chambers of commerce, municipal leagues, to run for school board, etc. That's the opportunity we see to create real change. (MI)
- We're with John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts CEO Michael Kaiser, who recommends coming out strong during a crisis. We are hitching our wagon to causes people care deeply about in our state, such as the local foods movement, the environment, "no carbon footprint" supporters and the department of education. We are doing this through as many innovative partnerships as we can; even small efforts make a big impression. (ME)
- Tourism is influential here, economically and politically. We have successfully secured the support of the tourism agency as advocates for the arts agency and they have adopted our cause. (TX)
- We are emphasizing instrumental arguments, such as the creative economy, and connecting with more commercial disciplines that state arts agencies haven't traditionally supported. We are talking less about art than we used to. (RI)
- Our agency has become a more active advocate for the arts and culture writ large. We haven't lost the art; our "bus" just has more people on it. (OR)
- We have endured some real attacks that have galvanized advocacy constructively, but crisis management is taking over everything. We need to get to the strategic positioning questions but haven't been able to spend our time that way. (NM)

Debate: Can State Arts Agencies Serve Everyone?

- Our original mission statement charges says, "for the benefit of all" people in our state. We can't do that to scale, so what *can* we do with the resources we've got? (WA)
- We have had to abandon a more expansive mission, too. We are not supporting the arts for the benefit of everyone, we're just looking at what constituents we can affect. We are no longer able to thrive if we retain our original aspirations. We have an oversupply of organizations and an undersupply of audiences and need to downshift and downsize as the sector matures. (VT)
- We cannot strive to do anything less than serve all the people in our state. There is a difference between mission (which captures a vision of what you value or would like to do) and goals or strategies, which may have to be more modest. We are obligated to serve everyone and cannot say we will no longer do that. (NC)
- Our job is to create public benefit. Every citizen is entitled to that benefit, so we do have an ultimate obligation to everyone. But along with that we're responsible for creating the maximum benefit with fewest resources. So our job right now is figuring

that out and being open minded about the question of "What is the most beneficial way to use fewer resources?" (IN)

- State arts agencies don't create the public benefit, our constituents do. Our job is to make sure that our constituents do it well, which moves us inevitably away from grants to different services, initiatives and marketing roles. (VT)
- In our state we are not moving away from grants, that's what people want and need and is also what our legislators understand. Our grants do serve the public. (WY)

Regardless of their mission focus or chosen strategies, state arts agencies need to achieve clarity on five "Rs":

- Relevance
- ROI
- Relationships
- Resources
- Responsibility

Food for Thought

- What's the "button" that will trigger the investment? It can't just be arts participation. Arts participation is alive and well in our state—and arts education is also popular—but those things are not translating into compelling legislators to support the state arts agency. What will? (KS)
- If we had to do it all over again, would we build our agencies in the same way? What would we do instead? (PA)
- Times have always been changing. This too shall pass. If we're strengthening our position in hard times we will be in a better position when resources return. We proved our value during the culture wars and we can prove them during this recession too. (AL)
- Our challenge cannot be to do more with less, it has to be to do *less* with less while retaining our value. This will involve experimentation, but we need to "fail forward" if necessary. (WA)

Saturday, October 16

Roundtable Discussion Highlights

Managing Political Transitions/New Governors

Facilitator: Philip Horn (PA)

- Demonstrate how the arts connect to candidates' platform issues.
- Activate people from United Arts Funds and Business Committees for the Arts.
- Few candidates have an arts plank in their platform. Pennsylvania has two candidates with arts positions (Tom Corbett and Dan Onorato). These planks can be used as models, or used to pressure other candidates into having an arts position.
- Nevada has done extensive candidate surveys and posted the results on-line: <http://arts4nevada.org>.
- Try to get an early bead on who will head up transition teams, then map lines of influence to them.
- Try to get an early bead on who the state budget chief will be, too.
- Savvy, experienced lobbyists can be an asset. (WESTAF provides some funds for this.) Also try to establish working relationships with other lobbyists supportive of the arts and/or lobbyists engaged by other cultural groups.

- Look for major arts patrons with ties to the new governor. Map who key supporters and contributors have been during the campaign and who in the arts sphere has contact with those individuals.
- Get an accurate read on the new administration's attitude toward the outgoing administration. Will ties with the past governor help or hurt? Will draft budgets or other guidance be considered or rejected?
- What is the SAA role in the inaugural? Is a role desirable?
- Will the new administration get rid of everyone? Who is at risk?
- Will they consider moving the agency? What are the options? Prepare for them.
- Redistricting is coming because of the Census and will occupy the attention of governors and legislators in the coming year.
- Consider a legislative caucus on the arts.

Communications

Facilitator: Bob Booker (AZ)

- The current environment is driving many states to raise their public profile.
- Arizona has adopted a multifaceted approach involving a website upgrade, blog communications and Facebook. They also are launching a campaign, "The choice is art."
- Social media present both opportunities and complexities for state arts agencies, particularly as they relate to advocacy. The state of Idaho has developed clearly defined rules about social networking for state personnel.
- Idaho has retooled the content and focus of its print publications, which constituents continue to value.
- In this environment it may be useful for state agency directors to develop a more public leadership "persona."

Retaining and Retraining Staff

Facilitator: Julie Henahan (OH)

- Staff need new skills and the flexibility to keep pace with evolving SAA roles and a changing environment. More knowledge and skills to develop creative economy programs and work with the for-profit sector would be particularly helpful.
- Options for staff training and professional development within states are very limited. Some states are discussing options for working with their regions to provide more opportunities for staff development.
- State arts agencies face many different constraints (from departments of administrative services and/or unions) on which staff they can retain or promote and on how job descriptions are developed and classified. This limits the flexibility of state arts agencies to adapt to change quickly.
- Review your personnel and department of administrative services policies carefully, because sometimes there are loopholes that nobody will have brought to your attention. Ohio was able to do this successfully.

Advocacy Strategies

Facilitator: Paul Weagraff (DE)

- Advocacy organizations are in transition (formulating or reformulating) in several states.
- Some states (including Michigan and Oregon) have *cultural* advocacy groups, not just arts advocacy groups.

- Regular communications are essential to the working relationship between the state arts agency and the arts advocacy organization. Rhode Island and their citizens group have a "no surprises" agreement.
- Several states include advocacy as a standing agenda item for all council meetings and involve the advocacy group in that discussion.
- The reverse—formally including the state arts agency on the advocacy group agenda—also can be helpful. In Texas, a staffer of the state arts agency is always an ex officio member of the advocacy group board.
- Less formal strategies also help to build and maintain trusting relationships. Maryland has monthly lunches between the directors of the state arts agency and the advocacy group to discuss issues in a timely way and explore topics that are difficult to address in larger groups or more public settings.
- Giving advocacy groups "a seat at the table" in strategic discussions can be helpful. Sometimes the biggest challenge is helping council members understand the difference between the state arts agency and the arts advocacy organization.
- South Carolina is working to synchronize strategic planning between the advocacy group and the state arts agency. South Dakota does this also.
- Good working relationships with lobbyists are essential.
- Also see the summary of the October 16 [Advocacy Forum](#), a joint discussion between state arts advocacy organizations and state arts agencies.