

Postcards from the Inferno

Lessons Learned from Recent Budget Battles

Session Notes

Assembly 2010 – October 15, 2010 – Austin, Texas

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

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This interactive, 90-minute dialogue session was designed to help state arts agencies reflect on recent experiences with budget reductions, elimination proposals and other crises. In addition to these notes, please see the session's [Advice Postcards](#).

WHAT HAVE WE LOST IN RECENT YEARS?

- State funds
- Personnel
- Momentum
- Visibility
- Support from some communities and advocates
- Stamina
- Ability to be proactive (necessarily spending more time reacting to crises)
- Unity (reductions accentuate competition and the gap between haves and have-nots)

WHAT'S DRIVING THESE LOSSES?

- Economic downturn
- Pressures to streamline and downsize state government
- Lack of recognition/understanding of the value of the arts
- Perception of the arts and state arts agencies as nonessential
- Political polarization (even if the arts aren't under direct attack, we get caught in the cross fire and have a hard time advancing our agenda)
- "Change" platforms, which make candidates less likely to support continuity of funding
- Growing antigovernment sentiment among the public
- Anti-intellectualism
- Perception that the arts are an elite pursuit
- Term limits (constant churn and lack of experienced legislative champions for the arts)

IS THERE ANYTHING ABOUT OUR OWN AGENCIES OR THE ARTS THAT ACCELERATES THE DRIVERS OR MAKES US MORE VULNERABLE?

- Uneven relationships between state arts agencies and statewide advocacy groups
- Lack of a unified message within the arts community itself
- Grantee distress and destabilization boomerangs back on state arts agencies
- Competition within cultural affairs departments

- We don't excel at politics and it's not our strongest skill set
- We act as—and are perceived as—takers rather than givers
- Arts groups are not active advocates
- Limited board engagement
- Resistance to change (within state arts agencies and among our constituents)
- Decreasing funds decrease our leverage
- Historical models for programs and participation may have lost relevancy
- Burnout and fatigue

WHAT TACTICS HELPED US CONTEND WITH THESE CHALLENGES?

Advocacy tactics:

- Made targeted contact with key decision makers (leaders or members of specific committees)
- Tailored messages to legislators' individual interests
- Mobilized large numbers of constituents to write, call and rally
- Brought youthful voices to budget hearings and testimonies
- Used social media tools to activate many new—and younger—advocates
- Approached legislative visits with three people: a person with a relationship, a person with data and a person with a story
- Established an arts caucus
- Repeated a consistent message again and again

Communications tactics:

- Developed a compelling return on investment message
- Increased frequency of communications
- Brought core constituencies (general operating support grantees) “inside” to empower their advocacy and prevent confusion or dissent
- Gave grantees advance notice about what to expect
- Wrote personal notes on grant contracts
- Made personal calls to constituents and partners

Programmatic tactics:

- Altered grants to reflect governor's priorities
- Maintained funding for selected programs that influence the most support (e.g., local government challenge funding)
- Developed a system to document the impact of nongrant services (phone consults, site visits, trainings, etc.)

Management tactics:

- Developed multiple scenario plans
- Devoted increased time to political management and crisis communications
- Included new constituents (e.g., private sector, chambers of commerce) in strategic planning
- Demonstrated lean operations, efficiency and austerity measures

Other tactics:

- Projected optimism and strength
- Put artwork in legislative offices

- Put past legislators on the arts council
- Rotated council members to different parts of the state to increase constituent contact and involvement

WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE OUR PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE?

- **Build stronger rapport with elected officials.** See them more frequently out of session. Establish your relationship before a crisis hits.
- **Cultivate support from local elected officials.** Mayors and city council members can be your most effective advocates to the state legislature, and are also part of the pipeline for later state-level office. Engaging them in the arts and arts advocacy will pay long-term dividends for communities and the state arts agency alike.
- **Assertively train grantees to advocate effectively.** Educate them about how and why they get their money. Teach them how to thank elected officials and communicate effectively about their value. Some states have instituted advocacy or thank-you requirements.
- **Train constituents to be change leaders in their communities.** Empower them to be not just arts advocates, but opinion leaders and future elected officials.
- **Engage non-arts advocates.** Good prospects include mayors, convention and visitors' bureaus, regional chambers of commerce and other business leaders.
- **Build a rapport with key staff—especially budget officers.** These individuals can have a big impact on state arts agencies outside of the traditional legislative process. They therefore require a separate relationship cultivation strategy.
- **Develop social media and communications networks before a crisis hits.** Have the tools, networks and relationships in place so that you can activate them in a hurry.
- **Institute programs that clearly address the priorities of the executive or legislative branch.** Grantees may be skeptical, but we need to make the relevance of work explicit.
- **Secure and use reliable information.** Statistics on jobs and leveraged funds are useful. Expect legislators to both want these data and disbelieve them. Emphasize numbers relevant to their districts. Combine stats with stories. Be sure to track stats for nongrant services.
- **Allocate dedicated time for relationship building, political management and message refinement.** These tasks will demand large amounts of time from senior staff, but job descriptions rarely take this into account, which results in more stress and burnout. Structure staff responsibilities to allow for the time that relationship development and crisis management truly require.
- **Strengthen ties with your advocacy organization.** Stay in frequent contact. Establish trust.
- **Provide positive leadership.** Set a tone of strong leadership. Project confidence and optimism. Celebrate victories—small and large—to reinforce positive progress. Maintain your sense of humor.
- **Be relentless.** As Winston Churchill said, “Nevah give up.”

Also see the [Advice Postcards](#) generated by participants.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- [Why Should Government Support the Arts?](#)
- [Arts Advocacy Checklist: A Self-Evaluation Tool for State Arts Agencies](#)
- [Tough Times: Advocacy Strategies in an Economic Downturn](#)
- [Facing Controversy: Arts Issues and Crisis Communications](#)
- [Strategy Sampler: State Arts Agency Grant Trends](#)
- [State Arts Agency Funding](#)