

FACING CONTROVERSY: ARTS ISSUES AND CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

“Are we so insensible to the traditions of liberty in our land, so fearful of what is different and new and intentionally disturbing, so anxious to record our timidity that we would sanction institutions for acting precisely as they are meant to act? Which is to say, arts institutions supporting artists and exhibiting their work?”

—Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY), during a 1989 Senate floor debate on amendments to restrict grant-making activity of the National Endowment for the Arts

From time to time, public arts funding faces controversy. Since its inception, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has had to respond to critics concerned about tax dollars spent on particular arts projects. Over the years, attacks have also been made against some state arts agencies for certain artistic projects they have supported. The appointed volunteer leaders and professional staffs of state arts agencies have had to answer the criticisms of state legislators and activists upset about public spending on the arts.

Discussion of the benefits and costs of public funding is a healthy part of any governmental budget process. This discussion at the state level, for instance, has stimulated research and project evaluation that enables arts spokespersons to be better prepared to articulate the accomplishments of their arts agency, its services and the activities it funds. An informed public is able to understand better the role of public support in making the arts available to all members of the community.

public funding and the meaning of art

In the democratic marketplace of ideas, controversy over a work of art can arise from a different interpretation about the meaning of a work. It can arise from different perceptions of the context in which a work is presented. It can arise from differences people have in what they expect from experiencing art. And it can arise from differences in comfort with the unfamiliar.

The prospect of controversy can be addressed productively by presenting art in a way that is meaningful to the public. Public funders of the arts, and those who are awarded public arts funding, should make a concerted effort to ensure accountability for the art



Volume VIII, Issue No. 1

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STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING ARTS SUPPORT

by paying close attention to the entire grant consideration process. Throughout the process, the funding agency can learn about the applicant's ability and intentions to provide a worthwhile experience for audiences.

Many arts organizations do advance work and offer educational programs for much of the art they present as a way of making it more accessible to a larger audience, especially with a planned exhibition or performance that could be challenging to audiences. These programs build understanding of art as a powerful vehicle for developing one's imagination and creativity; for conveying values and beliefs; and for communicating information as well as emotions. In the long run, the environment for crisis can be mitigated by education.

Over the years, state arts agencies have employed a range of strategies to handle controversies about the content of publicly-funded arts projects. Because art has the special capacity to expose a community to a whole set of social, moral and ethical issues which might otherwise remain unexpressed or avoided, public officials must understand that creative expression challenges us in ways that will not always be to everyone's liking. Practical accountability lies in implementing a purposeful set of activities to facilitate meaningful experience with art that receives public funding, and a plan for dealing with controversy in its crisis stage so that it can proceed as quickly as possible to a productive exchange of ideas.

-facing crisis

State arts agencies experienced in facing controversy unanimously agree: it is essential to have a strong communications plan in place before there is a problem. Ideally, a crisis communications strategy should grow out of a policy that links benefits, accountability and freedom of expression. That policy should be developed as part of an agency's basic plan, with the commitment and advocacy of the agency's leaders.

Otherwise, the sudden appearance of a full-blown controversy forces an agency to come up quickly with a crisis communications plan. According to those who have confronted a crisis—and the public relations experts agree—it's important to (1) move quickly; (2) get the facts; and (3) tell the whole story.

The following is an outline of steps in addressing crisis and a set of case examples that are intended to stimulate discussion and clarify thinking in determining an agency's approach to dealing with controversy.

i. develop a plan

Crisis often arises without warning. Be better prepared than you ever thought you would need to be. The first call about an emerging controversy may well be from the press.

Prepare a communications plan in advance. Involve your board and key staff members in developing the plan. Be clear about roles and messages. Aim for an official statement on policy that will focus on process rather than content. Use only designated spokespeople.

Case Example: Keep Information Flowing

A major contemporary art museum in the state mounts a traveling exhibition of photographs already notoriously controversial for the erotic content of some of the images. The museum receives general operating support from the state arts agency.

The state arts agency's public information office develops information for wide distribution, including material identifying and describing the artist, the exhibition and the context of the artist's work. Special material is prepared for members of the state legislature so they are not caught unaware by the exhibition's adversaries. The agency's effort includes working with individual legislators to differentiate fact from myth and prepare the politicians to answer constituents who might be upset by the exhibition.

Special advocacy alerts are prepared for the agency's staff and council members to inform them about the issues involved. The council and staff are kept informed about all developments. There are no repercussions against the state arts agency as a result of the exhibition.

ii. put a crisis communications plan into action

Educate your board and staff with the facts about the immediate controversy. Identify who speaks on behalf of the agency. Determine what materials need to be developed for the media.

Think through the situation and see both sides. Anticipate pros and cons. Identify key audiences. Clarify messages that address the immediate issue in the context of public benefits, accountability and appropriate process.

Consider which spokespersons can most effectively communicate with which audiences. Schedule editorial board meetings with local press.

Case Example: Talk to the Press

An art center in a rural community presents an exhibition sponsored by the state arts agency. A teacher in a local school enters a painting in the exhibition depicting Jesus Christ in a contemporary world. The painting wins the “Best in Show” prize. A local church raises complaints about the painting, and the art center director agrees to put the work on display in a separate room with a sign advising viewers of the painting’s subject matter. A newspaper editorial picks up the incident and charges the art center with censorship. The art center had no prior contact with the news media.

iii. be clear on standard PR procedures

Don't get combative. Focus on your messages and the arguments you want to make. Avoid the fight on other points, but be sure to correct the misinformation that extremists sometimes propagate. Have all the facts in order. Be honest.

Any controversy is more complex than just the “surface” issue. Anticipate other layers of meaning and intent beyond the subject of the controversy.

Case Example: Prepared and Still in Trouble

The principal art museum in the largest city and capital of the state receives general operating support from the state arts agency. A traveling exhibition presented by the museum includes a piece displaying the American flag on the floor, which becomes the focus of controversy.

The museum does advance work to prepare the community for the exhibition. For example, the art museum involves an individual of high stature from the American Legion to serve on the committee that develops the educational materials to go along with the exhibition.

The exhibition has been shown previously in another state, without controversy, but in an experimental gallery, not in a mainstream art museum. In that state, the catalogue for the show was funded by the state arts agency.

All those involved are surprised at the furor and unprepared for the magnitude of the offensive when the exhibition opens at the city’s art museum. State arts agency leadership believes that the “assault” is about more than just art. The event is used by some of the groups leading the opposition to the exhibition as an opportunity to organize membership and raise funds nationally.

Although the state arts agency receives less attention from the critics than the museum or the participating local arts agency, to the opponents of the artwork it is irrelevant that the state agency funded the institution rather than the exhibition. Most of the negative focus on the state arts agency comes from the legislature, which eventually passes a measure prohibiting funds to be used for projects that desecrate the flag.

iv. examine internal processes

Look at your internal systems and make sure that they aren't working against you. Manage staff responses to the press so that they are consistent with your communications strategy. Formulate messages for responding to legislators, the press and other key constituents, including your grantees. Keep people informed as far in advance as possible, particularly your staff and council members.

Case Example: Internal Response to Controversy

The state arts agency receives a grant application from a local gay and lesbian film festival. In the agency's two-step panel process, applications are rated numerically and then all the highly-rated applications are reviewed as a group. All recommended grants then go to the board for a final review, with a possible interim review by the board's executive committee. It is not unusual in this process for an application with a high score to go unfunded.

The panel reviews the grant application and gives it a high rating. In the second step of the process, the panel discusses the application further, raising possible political ramifications, which are not review criteria. Following a heated and stressful discussion, the panel recommends against funding the application.

The film festival's funding request then goes to the executive committee before review by the board. Discussion at both the executive committee and the board is also stressful. The board supports the panel's recommendation and does not fund the application.

After notification of its rejection, the applicant asks to see the minutes of the panel meeting and requests a meeting with the arts agency director, who, along with the program director meets with the representatives of the film festival committee. Following these developments, the state arts agency concludes that its internal processes are not adequate for dealing with this type of situation. Grant-making procedures are rewritten to include a policy that panel deliberations must consider the best interests of all of the arts in the state. Agency staff briefs all panels on the necessity of thinking beyond the immediate grant application. Staff seeks to identify in advance possible problems with a grant application; staff and the agency director discuss anticipated issues and agree on how to present a potentially controversial grant application to the panels.

v. meet the press

Develop a press strategy. Immediately brief your agency's public information officer on a situation-by-situation basis. Try to get the facts right away. Identify your key press allies, and put your public information officer on the front line with the media. Don't lose time. Deal with the situation early and publicly.

Case Example: Telling the Facts

A grant applicant proposes a project for which funding is denied. The application is deficient on procedural grounds (it is submitted in the wrong calendar year) and on substantive grounds (it lacks a plan for the proposed artist's residency). Other funding sources also reject the application.

The applicant goes to the media and claims that the rejection is an infringement on their First Amendment rights. A great deal of media coverage ensues. The state arts agency director, acting as the single point of information, responds to media calls with the facts. The issue goes no further than the press stories. There is no negative impact on other arts organizations in the state and no fallout from the state's legislators. Credible relations with the press work to the advantage of the state arts agency.

vi. build strong relationships

Maintain your relationships in the arts community and media year-round. Keep up with your commitments. These connections can help you in times of crisis.

Build alliances before an attack occurs. Think broadly when identifying allies: for example, education groups, civil liberties organizations, labor unions, moderate religious leaders. To develop support, link the public benefit of the arts, accountability, and the free expression of ideas with the mission of arts organizations. Explain how that linkage also applies to each ally.

Involve legislators from the beginning as allies of the arts. Make politicians aware of the breadth of community interest in the arts and specific arts organizations. Prepare the community of arts constituents.

Case Example: Sabotage Control

Members of a religious political extremist organization call on the director of a state arts agency and ask to look through the agency's files. Following its search, the organization compiles a list of projects supposedly funded by the state arts agency, which are fabricated and sensationalized to appear damaging to the arts agency. The extremist group's material and a list of supposed controversial projects is placed inside envelopes and deposited on the desks of all the state's legislators.

Over the years, the state arts agency has built friendships with legislative leadership. The agency has always provided the governor's office and legislators with information about the state arts agency's activities. Agency staff routinely prepares a "hot" list of projects that might be misinterpreted or raise questions, to enable its legislative supporters to counter any charges made by the agency's opponents. The state arts agency is tipped off by a friendly legislator, and other pro-arts allies in the legislature are rallied to support the state arts agency against the misleading charges made by its extremist opponents. The damage is controlled.

examples of freedom of expression policy statements

Iowa Arts Council

"The mission of the Iowa Arts Council is to support the arts for the benefit of all. Support of free speech is the centerpiece of this mission. The Council is an advocate for and defender of the right of free speech for all citizens under the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. The Council also recognizes the need for public support of the arts and understands the responsibilities that accompany the allocation of public funds. The Council seeks the advice of qualified Iowans through the use of review committees for funding recommendations. To uphold and maintain the highest artistic standards and to encourage excellence in the arts is a directive of the Council. The Council respects the integrity of an artist's personal vision and right to freedom of expression. Attempts to control or censor the arts are rejected by the Council. The Council supports freedom of choice and access to the arts for all citizens."

Ohio Arts Council

"The Ohio Arts Council recognizes the need for public support of the arts and understands the responsibility that accompanies the allocations of public funds. The Ohio Arts Council's legislative mandate charges the Council to foster and preserve the arts in Ohio. Recognizing that responsibility, the Council is committed to uphold and maintain the highest artistic standards and to encourage the best in all fields.

"Further, the Ohio Arts Council is conscious of the multicultural diversity of our society. The Council realizes that freedom of expression is at the core of our social, cultural and political heritage. The Council rejects all attempts to control or censor the arts and supports the National Endowment for the Arts in its efforts to create and sustain a climate where freedom of thought, imagination and inquiry are encouraged."