



Executive Directors Peer Session
September 16, 2016

Notes

Leadership Succession and Transition

Many state arts agencies are facing—or recently have navigated—executive transitions. According to a preconference poll, 14% of state arts agencies have succession or executive transition plans in place, 86% do not.

The group offered observations about the **unique nature of state arts agency transitions:**

- Someone can have a strong background in arts leadership and be completely unprepared for this job due to the unusual nature of the work: a blend of policy, politics, finance, relationships and hands-on operations, all taking place in a state government regulatory context.
- Multiple states noted that despite the best intentions and up-front planning, overlap time between an outgoing and incoming director is rarely possible.
- One can have a smart transition plan in place, but the political "powers that be" can override your plan at any time. Transition strategy at the executive level is not always possible for state arts agencies, given how appointments are made in state government. The smartest thing to do is extensively cross-train staff so that there's a very deep bench behind the executive director.
- Several states have systematically documented key functions, not only for the executive director but also for important staff positions. This kind of documentation takes time, but it also saves time when new staff don't need to start from scratch or reinvent the wheel.
- The risks and ripple effects of transition extend way beyond the executive director position. In small agencies, multiple functions are interdependent and change needs to be managed across different program/policy areas simultaneously.

- Several states are facing retirements or turnover in other key positions (deputies, program directors) that are significantly affecting the agency as a whole. Managing such transitions has a big impact on an executive director's time.
- Hiring authority is uncertain in state government, especially during budget downturns. Unfilled positions are, in some ways, a greater problem than lack of documentation.

The group reflected on executive turnover as just one kind of transition. State arts agencies face **many different kinds of transition** and can think holistically and proactively about change:

- State arts agencies can exert influence and "be two steps in front of political turnover." One state has conducted meetings between the state arts agency chair and both of the candidates running for governor. These meetings reviewed enabling legislation and the role of the agency and set the stage for proactive input for governor's transition teams.
- Multiple states said that they conduct candidate forums on the arts, to elevate the importance of the arts and the state arts agency "before anyone starts making decisions" about policy agendas, council appointments or budget recommendations. Apart from being a locus of advocacy efforts, such forums demonstrate to candidates that arts constituents are a force with which to be reckoned.
- Other agencies noted that the politics of being an embedded agency limit what some state arts agencies can control. A state arts agency can exert great policy and programmatic influence within a larger department, but it may experience more restrictions on participating in policy discourse before elections occur.
- There is a big difference between procedural preparedness and agency transition, which involves deep strategy and plans for continuity of effort over time.
- Even setups for success can turn on a dime. "You can be way out in front of things, but all it takes is one wackadoodle think-tank to get to the governor and change everything. Even more important than a succession plan is a crisis management plan."
- One state has a sealed "In case of emergency" envelope containing explicit executive transition guidance for the board in the event that the current executive director becomes incapacitated.
- Change comes in many shapes and forms. "Don't underestimate the value of trial and error." State arts agencies have been known to experiment every

time they face transitions in staffing, state government, politics, society, and a wide mix of things that they can and cannot control. Every new director will have his or her own agenda and priorities. "If we're as good as we're supposed to be, and if our strategic plans have good aim, we'll do okay."

The group concurred that it would be helpful for NASAA to develop some model practice recommendations around state arts agency executive transition planning and to circulate the outline that North Dakota has developed.

New Program and Service Models

Executive directors shared examples of programs and special initiatives that are beyond "business as usual" in their scope or objectives:

- The Arizona Commission on the Arts "Next 50" initiative is engaging communities across the state in asset mapping and artist-driven problem-solving activities. It's meant to span 2.5 years, culminating in an artist prize of \$100,000 sponsored by a foundation partner. This effort is reinventing previous paradigms of planning: rather than asking traditional questions (and getting the same old answers about funding, etc.), the agency is cultivating the capacity of localities to use the arts to address challenges immediately relevant to their communities. The arts commission is locating the leadership for this in city/town government in order to grow more local resources to support the arts. The state community foundation and two other private foundations are backing the process.
- Approaching its 50th anniversary, the Vermont Arts Council considered how it could most strategically use its resources to effect change. It asked, What are we positioned to do that no other agency in our state is positioned to do? The resulting initiative is the [Vermont Creative Network](#), a collective of organizations, businesses and individual artists all united around a goal of advancing Vermont's creative sector. The network was officially codified by the legislature this past May. It's a cross-sector initiative based on collective impact models and using Results Based Accountability as an evaluation approach.
- The Rhode Island State Council on the Arts has launched a new Arts & Culture Research Network. This effort is harnessing the skills of high-caliber, university based researchers—folks who usually study economics and social science, health and public policy—around a cultural research agenda. The group is starting by measuring the impact of a recent arts bond issue, taking an [interdisciplinary approach](#) to evaluating the effects of capital improvements for cultural facilities. The arts council plans to continue to engage the collaborative beyond the bond issue study to investigate other cultural impacts in the future.

- The Maine Arts Commission is establishing a new [501\(c\)\(3\) support organization](#). More than a "friends of" group, this new entity will help the Arts Commission to advance the arts across the state, unite allies and support advocacy efforts. The connection with the state arts agency is formally legislated to ensure that the new entity works in harmony with the state's agenda.
- The Iowa Division of the Arts set a goal of engaging new (and younger) artists through the agency's [fellowship program](#). To do this they paired grant awards with an extensive artist professional development program delivered through Creative Capital. The agency also coordinated a series of statewide exhibitions and performances featuring the work of fellowship award winners. The Division has seen interest in the program grow by 40%, and more artists are getting engaged in other aspects of the agency's work. For instance, artists used to comprise 10% of attendees of the statewide arts summit; now that figure exceeds 30%.

For additional examples of innovative programs and policies from all state arts agencies, check out the [State to State archive](#) in NASAA Notes.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Executive directors affirmed that diversity, equity and inclusion are priorities for the state arts agency field. They compared notes on **action steps currently under way** among state arts agencies:

- More than 200 languages are spoken in Washington, which is demographically and geographically diverse. ArtsWA just completed a new [strategic plan](#) that articulates social justice and advancing diversity as a cross-cutting objective. The agency also has created a set of metrics for measuring its progress in diversity.
- The Arizona Commission on the Arts has developed a training program for young artists to become activists in racial equity and social justice. [AZ ArtWorker](#) provides a pool of top-notch and highly diverse trainers to help artists, especially artists of color, to develop socially relevant programs and increase the impact of their work.
- In one of the least racially diverse states in the nation, the Maine Arts Commission is being proactive by devoting its [upcoming conference](#) to cultural equity. The Arts Commission also is establishing connections with the state's Somali community and is working collaboratively with the state's strong Native American populations. Engaging rural, coastal and island communities is another important aspect of the Commission's inquiry into what cultural equity looks like in the state.

- Drawing on a successful collective impact effort around arts education as well as WESTAF's emerging leaders of color initiative, the California Arts Council has developed the [Cultural Pathways](#) program to grow the pipeline of arts leaders of color. The program combines grant funds with professional development and technical assistance.
- Diversity and inclusion were the themes of the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs's most recent statewide conference. The agency also invested \$17,000 in a new [Diversity and Inclusion Awards Program](#), recognizing individuals and groups who are doing outstanding work in this area. Awards were presented by the secretary of state to a wide variety of entities, including those focusing on Asian, East Indian, disabled and LGTBO communities. The funds must be reinvested in the grantee's diversity work.
- The Alabama Arts Council's [Bill Bates Leadership Institute](#) regularly focuses its programs on diversity and inclusion. The bottom-line guidance to constituents is, "Diversify your staff and boards." Once an organization takes these steps, many other positive policy and programming outcomes follow.
- Diversity isn't an issue only for the arts; many parts of society and government are wrestling with it. A former South Carolina Secretary of State developed the [Diversity Leaders Initiative](#), which trains managers to address equity and inclusion issues in all aspects of their work. The South Carolina Arts Commission offers scholarships to send arts leaders to participate in this training.
- In our conversations we cannot just talk about leadership. Capital and access to capital are crucially important. The very origins of state arts agencies may inhibit access to funds for grass-roots, unincorporated or nontraditional groups that have been excluded by the dominant structural systems. The Georgia Council for the Arts is trying to figure out how to work within the state system to push the bounds and make that capital more accessible. NASAA could help state arts agencies think about how to do that.

Several **additional models and resources** were shared:

- NASAA recently issued a best-practices catalog of [State Arts Agency Policies & Programs Addressing Diversity](#). Also, NASAA's recent [Changing Demographics web seminar](#) offers a good summary of how demographic change and related policy issues affect state arts agencies.
- Grantmakers in the Arts (GIA) has a forceful [statement on racial equity in the arts](#). GIA has convened a series of webinars on the topic that are archived and available on-line.

- Americans for the Arts's [statement on cultural equity](#) is deliberately broad in scope, including ethnicity, age, ability, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status and religion.

The group observed that state arts agencies are the only arts-specific infrastructure available to reach every community in America. Foundations, corporations and the NEA are too limited in their reach to make a broad-scale difference in the field, and local arts agencies don't exist everywhere. Executive directors expressed support and encouragement for additional NASAA leadership and research on this topic and urged NASAA to be bold and proactive in its approach.

NASAA CEO Pam Breaux thanked the group for the insightful discussion and the opportunity to gather input about how NASAA can best be of service. She shared that NASAA's Governance Committee is developing a policy statement that will set a high bar for both NASAA and state arts agencies. It will be informed by dialogue with members, and executive directors will have an opportunity to weigh in. She noted that this is an evolving and enduring effort for our field that requires ongoing self-improvement over time. Together, NASAA and state arts agencies are well positioned to make a difference.