

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

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Strategic Planning Assessment & Framing

NASAA Board of Directors

5 May 2016

NASAA last conducted a comprehensive strategic planning process in 2010 and 2011. The plan was ratified by the membership in 2012, and the board re-affirmed its currency in 2014. Member satisfaction with NASAA's plan and services is high. However, the NASAA Board of Directors requested during the recent CEO transition process that the strategic plan be revisited soon. With Pam Breaux on board, the board's Planning & Budget (P&B) Committee concurred that now is a good time to consider our goals and assess NASAA's strategic position, potential opportunities and priorities for serving the membership.

To this end, the P&B Committee recommended a strategic planning timetable and process map for developing a new plan to take effect in NASAA's FY 2018. During its spring 2016 meeting, the NASAA Board of Directors approved that timetable. The board also articulated the optimal scope and expectations for the new plan, providing early guidance on key issues to be considered and stakeholders to be consulted. These notes capture the highlights of that board guidance discussion.

WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF NASAA's CURRENT STRATEGIC PLAN?

- + The existing plan is very succinct. It's helpful for the mission, roles, goals and objectives to all fit on a single page.
- + The focus on state arts agencies is tight and productive.
- + The current plan clearly expresses what NASAA does.
- + Who we are matches how we do our work. The current plan shows a strong alignment between NASAA's mission, our roles, our principles, and our actual activities.
- + "Knowledge, Representation and Community" expresses the essence of what we do as well as the outcomes we seek, and the goals align well with these roles.
- + Annual work plans are well-integrated into the long-term strategic plan.
- + Action plans make member benefits explicit.
- + Budgets are attached to action plans.
- + The existing plan is tangible and evidence-based.

- The plan document should be much more visually engaging and accessible. It needs a design sensibility.
- The next plan could include a more pointed treatment of organizational values.
- Our next plan should evoke a compelling case statement for state arts agencies.
- NASAA's next plan can answer key "Why?" or "So what?" or "To what end?" questions. Why are state arts agencies important? Why is NASAA important? Why are our goals what they are?
- "Key Working Relationships" needs to be reviewed. Consider possible expansions or priorities.

? Outcomes: Some board members felt that our desired outcomes/results were not clearly expressed, others felt that they were.

? Methodological notes: Some board members wanted the document to include more in-depth details on planning methodologies and input mechanisms. Other board members did not think it was important to expand this portion of the plan. We can seek a happy medium and/or provide additional detail in supplemental form.

? Means and tactics: Should these be more explicit in the main strategic plan? Or is that what the action plans are for?

WHAT HAVE NASAA's MOST IMPORTANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS BEEN UNDER THE EXISTING STRATEGIC PLAN?

- Research tools and data services are excellent.
- Convenings are productive and valued highly by the field.
- Customized technical assistance has been critical to numerous states in crisis.
- However, it hasn't been all about crisis response; NASAA does a good job of informing and encouraging members' work on longer term issues.
- NASAA's responsiveness is top notch. Turnaround time is great when members call for help or information.
- Support for new directors is imperative given the changes underway in our field.
- NASAA has been a strong collaborator and partner in national work important to state arts agencies.
- We provide very good intelligence on what's happening in Washington.
- NASAA is scrupulously non-/pan- partisan.
- We are thoughtful and measured in our navigation of tricky politics.
- We have secured the 40% in an era of federal funding flux.
- NASAA is very accessible, with many pathways (high-tech and high-touch) into participation.
- A governance model that taps into the talents of both state arts agency staff and state arts agency volunteers/councils is an asset.
- We have clearly defined staff roles and good staff-member contact.
- NASAA has been a good steward of limited resources.
- We have a commitment to continual improvement.
- NASAA has strong leadership, and a successful CEO transition was an achievement.

WHAT CAN NASAA DO BETTER?

- Progress has been too slow in building federal/national relationships and policies (beyond NEA and the 40%) that develop new resources for state arts agencies.
- We need more outreach and education for council members and chairs.
- We could tell our story (the story of state arts agencies and the story of NASAA) better.
- There is room to evolve how we convene and define job-alike peer groups.
- Planning is an opportunity to re-introduce NASAA and its brand to newcomers and to educate the membership about what we do.
- Planning also is an opportunity to refresh our design/visual identity.
- NASAA has hit a capacity wall. This limits our ability to take our work to the next level, until we find a way to expand our human and financial resources. Resource development needs to be a priority in future plans.
- We use too many words.

SHOULD WE START FROM SCRATCH OR BUILD ON PIECES OF THE CURRENT PLAN?

Board members affirmed that the current plan works as a good point of departure, but offered some targeted considerations for improvement:

- A new plan should capitalize on our recent leadership transition to convey a sense of fresh momentum, newness and change.
- Do we need a values statement? The existing "Characteristics of our Work" items are relevant and important, but they don't speak to larger issues of what we value or what we stand for. Maybe roll those into a values statement that captures what we believe in and how we will behave?
- We certainly need a variety of techniques ("Tools and Tactics") to do our work. But does that need to be written in the plan? This could be condensed. At least avoid the distinction between tools and tactics, which is not currently clear.
- Use more verbs.
- Diversity language needs to be much more forward and forceful.
- Should NASAA change its name?

There were mixed views regarding Goal 3, "Sustain a strong Assembly to support the work of state arts agencies now and in the future." Perspectives included:

- It seems self-serving (not focused on members) and obvious. Omit this?
- It's essential. It articulates the capacity (governance, management and resources) needed to accomplish everything else in the plan. NASAA's work in those areas should not be invisible.
- Given our resource development needs, cutting Goal 3 could send the wrong message.
- Maybe use the word "association" or "organization" rather than "Assembly" in this goal?

WHAT STRATEGIC ISSUES OR QUESTIONS SHOULD NASAA's FORTHCOMING PLANNING PROCESS EXPLORE?

Influence

- What's our path forward with a new President and Congress?
- What's our place in the cultural advocacy ecosystem?
- What's our place in the larger public policy ecosystem? (i.e., education, economic development, health, corrections, rural development, etc.)
- How can NASAA connect to other national policy networks?
- NASAA and SAAs need to be able to secure a seat at the table for economic development (and other) policy making. How?
- How can NASAA help SAAs effect change in local, state and national policy?

Relevance

- What is the relevance of state arts agencies? What is the relevance of NASAA?
- Crystallize the unique role of state arts agencies.
- Advance the cause and the language around why government should support the arts.
- How can we help SAAs cope with ongoing politics/policies aimed at downscaling government?
- The good thing about government is continuity. The bad thing about government is continuity!
- Let's articulate the competitive advantage of SAAs.

Access & Inclusion

- How can NASAA and SAAs meaningfully advance diversity in our sector?
- Resource inequities are intensifying. How should SAAs relate? How can NASAA help?
- The work of SAAs offers a pathway to engaging citizens in finding solutions to shared problems. NASAA can model how state arts agencies communicate about this.

State Arts Agency Capacity

- How can NASAA navigate the sensitivities of state-level advocacy and support SAA efforts to grow their own resources?
- How should SAAs cope with generational change and SAA leadership transitions? How can NASAA help with knowledge transfer and leadership development? ("Feel the churn...")

NASAA's Capacity

- What strategies will work to develop and diversify NASAA resources, both contributed and earned?
- How do we resolve capacity barriers?
- This plan – and this organization - cannot be all things to all people. Stay mission-focused and realistic.
- Do nothing redundant.

WHAT STAKEHOLDER GROUPS SHOULD WE CONSULT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NASAA's NEXT PLAN?

The board noted that **state arts agencies** remain NASAA's primary stakeholders:

- State arts agencies: both staffers and commissioners/council members
- Individual donors who have contributed to NASAA over time
- Funders who have engaged with NASAA in the past
- Prospective donors

However, additional connections and conversations should be organized to inform the development of the plan:

Advocacy/Policy Perspectives

- SAAN (State Arts Action Network) members
- CAG (Cultural Advocacy Group) partners
- Current – and prospective - policy partners
- Federal agencies: Small Business Administration, Dept. of Defense, Dept. of Agriculture
- Congressional staffers and the Congressional Arts Caucus
- Elected officials who have been leaders/champions for the arts

Multi-Sector Perspectives

- Rural development networks, including LISC (Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation)
- Arts Education Partnership
- BCA (Business Committee for the Arts)
- National Business Incubator Association
- Crowd-funders
- CEOs or presidents of other national professional associations (non-arts), especially those with policy roles

- Look at the networks that SAAs impact, then look at the networks that authorize/oversee SAAs

Other Arts/Colleague Groups

- Regional arts organizations
- Grantmakers in the Arts
- Americans for the Arts
- State networks of philanthropic communities
- ArtSpace, ArtPlace and placemaking organizations

Caution: We need to narrow this list down, filter it according to NASAA's capacity and select conversations that will yield the highest payoff. We should retain the flexibility to adjust our outreach as we go and adapt to feedback received from informants.

Suggestions: Find a way to use the state arts agency peer group network to inform planning. Be sure to engage disruptors.

SHOULD NASAA's STRATEGIC PLAN BE "EVERGREEN" OR HAVE A FIXED EXPIRATION DATE?

The board reviewed NASAA's past practices of "evergreen" planning. Recent NASAA plans have been modular, combining strategic plans and action plans. Our strategic plan sets forth the long-term goals we want to achieve and articulates the enduring principles that guide our work. It's designed as an "evergreen" document that the board commits to revisiting at least every three years - sooner, if circumstances necessitate. Action plans have specific annual start/end dates and itemize the near-term steps necessary to achieve NASAA's long-term goals. Combined with ongoing evaluation, this approach aligns NASAA's day-to-day priorities and management with our strategic goals. This approach also allows NASAA to address new needs, to make midcourse corrections in our work and to adapt to new opportunities or unforeseen constraints.

The board saw several advantages of an evergreen approach:

- It's responsive, ensuring that planning is driven by the needs of the field or the organization rather than a (quasi-arbitrary) calendar date.
- It's flexible.
- It's efficient. "Too much strategic planning becomes a drag on productivity for the board and the staff."
- The tandem strategic/action plan method is an excellent model for the field.

The primary disadvantage of an evergreen approach lies in potential confusion about time-frames. Staff noted that some members of NASAA's last NEA review panel were not clear about the currency of NASAA's plan or did not understand (or did not concur with) an evergreen approach. Board member responses to this concern included:

- Seeking input for annual action planning and feedback loops keep us current.
- Is this a semantic problem? If needed, find a word other than "evergreen." Or just explain the virtues of an evergreen approach more fully.
- The evergreen approach works well for NASAA, which can and should be more flexible than state arts agencies.
- Don't overreact to NEA comments.

Decision: Retain the evergreen paradigm.