

NASAA Strategic Planning Forum Report: All-Staff Strategic Planning Meeting

Context and Intent

As part of its [comprehensive strategic planning](#) effort, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies contracted with Artistic Logistics to facilitate a meeting with the full-time employees of NASAA (minus one, who was ill) on February 21, 2017. This meeting – one strand of a multi-faceted planning process¹ – was designed to consider NASAA's value, assess the organization's strengths and weaknesses, explore potential opportunities and dangers on NASAA's horizon, and consider NASAA's future needs.

This all-staff forum was important to complete before drafting a new strategic plan. While guidance and direction from NASAA's board, its membership and experts in other fields are essential to the formulation of a new plan, staff input is just as crucial. The depth of staff knowledge about the arts, public policy and state arts agencies (SAAs) is a major strategic asset, and it is the staff that bears the ultimate responsibility for fulfilling the NASAA's mission on a day-to-day basis.

The agenda (see Appendix) for the all-staff forum was developed by the consultants, Lisa Mount and MK Wegmann of Artistic Logistics, in consultation with NASAA's senior leadership team. Portions of the agenda were designed to mirror questions that had been asked of NASAA's board, while other portions of the agenda were unique to the staff. Lisa and MK facilitated the meeting, which took place over three hours.

Initial Summary

The staff session gave staff members an opportunity to reflect on both the internal and external facets of NASAA. It started with the question of why NASAA itself as a national entity matters, then addressed the question of why SAAs matter. The obvious but critical point was made that NASAA matters because the SAAs matter. Staff emphasized the value of the SAAs in linking the citizens of the states and federal jurisdictions to the arts and culture resources that are available to them; by supporting and funding artists and the arts infrastructure, communities benefit. Moreover, the smooth functioning of the SAAs provide examples of functioning government systems, fostering the democratic process.

These **strengths of the SAAs** were identified. SAAs:

- make the arts accessible to all the residents of their states, in both rural and urban areas
- are responsive to artists, arts organizations, and their communities

¹ Note that this report addresses just one strand of NASAA's planning process. Other strands (including other in-person forums, individual phone interviews, statistical benchmarking and an online poll) harvested knowledge from a variety of sectors: government, economic development, rural development, education, philanthropy and the arts. By combining multiple outreach methods, NASAA was able to secure robust multi-sector input that extended far across – and far beyond - the arts field.

- the field has worked hard to ensure that their processes are genuinely fair
- spur action in their states in many ways, including preserving cultures
- are good at accountability to many levels of stakeholders

In identifying the ways that **SAA**s are **vulnerable**, the challenges of the political arena, the bureaucratic aspects of government systems and accountability and the chronic problems brought on by limited resources were mentioned as ongoing issues. And, as was cited in the Associations Forum that was also part of this process, the turnover at leadership levels creates an environment where orientation and training are constant needs. These have a deleterious effect on stability and can frustrate forward progress. Other important ways that SAA

s are vulnerable are their lack of diversity, not reflecting the demographics of their constituents; and the relatively low priority that the arts hold in our civil society. SAAs, like artists and arts organizations must constantly justify their existence and prove their value.

In assessing the **strengths and vulnerabilities of NASAA itself**, the staff noted that it has a strong reputation as a leader in the field, marked by credibility, responsiveness and stability. NASAA's knowledge of and experience with SAA staffs and the field as a whole is a deep strength, making it a trusted resource. NASAA's ability to support the SAA

s' case-making is an imperative that has guided the organization's work for many years, as is increasing visibility for the arts field in general and the role of SAAs within it. The "knowledge, representation, community" focus for NASAA was affirmed in this discussion.

In many ways, the stability of NASAA and the continuity of its services to its field give it a strong position to counter the vulnerabilities of its members. NASAA maintains a set of good relationships at every level in which it operates – with Congress and the NEA, and with its members. These members are politically diverse, which gives NASAA a deeper credibility than organizations working in the same arenas that are viewed as being more partisan. NASAA's reputation for research over the long term provides it with deep knowledge and respect. The efficiency of its operations are an antidote to the bureaucracy that the SAA

s experience, as is its high degree of communication with its members, both formally and informally.

However, NASAA is challenged in some of the same ways as its members:

- It is vulnerable, as are all organizations relating to government, to changing times and trends;
- Its financial model is a systemic vulnerability – the organization relies heavily on NEA funding;
- It experiences a gap between its capacity and its desire to provide excellent programs and services; and
- The challenges of diversity, equity and inclusion are present at NASAA, as they are everywhere in the arts.

This process of staff analysis of both SAA

s and NASAA yielded ideas and recommendations for ways in which NASAA's strengths can be leveraged to address the vulnerabilities. The challenges of taking on new projects or expanding current ones were identified in the segment of the day when NASAA's internal infrastructure was

addressed. NASAA is still in the process of its leadership transition; it is still functioning in the “old” system. A significant opportunity was identified for a deeper discussion and analysis of ways in which to grow and change to better respond to the organization’s needs and the needs of the field. Fresh assertions of the value of the arts and articulating a big vision for NASAA and the field with new strategies were discussed, as was an increased focus on diversity.

It was indicated that perhaps NASAA has been “over-cautious” in not getting too far ahead of its members, holding back a little on taking leadership positions for its field. As a membership organization, of course, the national entity is there to respond to and support its members. However, in a changing environment, there are opportunities for leadership that NASAA is in a singular position to take. Convening the peer associations is an example of this kind of initiative, opening doors to new advocacy and visibility through cross-sector relationships.

Detailed Notes

Why NASAA?

We began with the essential question of why NASAA matters, in order to dig into the primary motivations for organizing and operating this association. The staff was eloquent in their reasoning, and passionate about their work.

At its core, NASAA only matters if SAAs matter. The beliefs in the room were captured in two statements, and echoed in many more throughout the session:

- SAAs encourage citizen participation in the arts
- SAAs are an example of what is right with democracy, and what good government looks like

NASAA’s role in **field- and community- building** is a powerful motivator. While echoing the losing side in the recent presidential campaign, the notion that the field is “stronger together” is still very compelling. NASAA enables SAAs to see their similarities and their unique aspects, building relationships that allow for benchmarking as well as learning, addressing the isolation that leaders of SAAs often feel in their home states. Finally, NASAA is able to focus on the future of SAAs, when the agencies themselves often cannot look beyond next week or next month.

NASAA’s research and **knowledge** provision is one of its central purposes, which has utility in many areas. This is founded in a belief that SAAs’ effectiveness increases with knowledge, and NASAA’s ability to curate information for them supports strong trend forecasting. The research NASAA does uses facts and evidence to support advocacy at both the state and federal level, and to advocate for the value of the arts to the public. NASAA is able to be a strong voice for public support of the arts because of its research orientation and the credibility that confers.

NASAA is the sole organization providing specific, much-needed support to SAAs, in a variety of ways:

- We counter isolation among SAA staffs, and help to provide recognition for this work as a profession
- We’re crisis counselors who can provide a calm approach to difficult situations

- We build skills among SAA leaders and staffs
- We support peer learning

NASAA's work on **advocacy** and its efforts to influence policy are seen and felt as an essential service to the field of SAAs, and the arts and culture sector writ large. NASAA is the only voice for support of state arts funding and activity at the national level, and has consistently presented a unified front to the field, defending public funding at both the federal and state levels. Because of its independence as an organization, NASAA is free to lobby and advocate, where the agencies often cannot. NASAA staff recognized that threats to public funding are an on-going condition, that will always need to be countered with compelling arguments about the utility and necessity of public funding for the arts.

Finally, the NASAA staff asserted unequivocally that NASAA is necessary to the arts and culture field regardless of whether the NEA continues to exist. States are becoming more powerful actors during this time in US public life, and NASAA's support of individual states fits with current trends, even as it counters the efforts to eliminate public funding for the arts.

NASAA Members

As a swift means to assess the field NASAA serves, we asked the staff to articulate the "superpowers" and "vulnerabilities" of SAAs. This yielded a broad view of NASAA's constituency, and a set of implications that may influence the direction of the strategic plan.

Superpowers

SAAs make the arts **accessible** to all the residents of their states, in both rural and urban areas; some states have specific programs to ensure that public funding reaches every county. SAAs uphold standards that encourage equitable participation in the arts, and support of **diverse** artists – not just the usual suspects from the dominant culture.

SAAs are **responsive** to artists, arts organizations, and their communities, consistently building connections to their constituents by listening, and building connections among them in a variety of ways.

The SAA field has worked hard to ensure that their processes are genuinely **fair** to all who engage with them, and to match that equitable orientation with innovation in the provision of programs.

SAAs are not highly visible entities in most states, **working quietly** to make things happen over the long term, and letting the artists and arts organizations take the spotlight.

SAAs **spur action** in their states in many ways, including preserving cultures and heritages, from folk processes to immigrant communities' artistic practices, and more. Rallying around an SAA is often a first step into citizen arts advocacy and activism, although sometimes this activism is directed at the SAAs themselves (nobody gets it right all the time).

SAs are good at **accountability** to many levels of stakeholders, often finding themselves managing upward to governors and legislatures, reporting outward to constituencies, and adapting to change as external forces work upon them. SAs have learned, with help from NASAA, to be flexible with budget challenges. They maintain a strong knowledge of their **political environment**, and have had some major successes in turning Governors into arts lovers.

Vulnerabilities

SAs are bedeviled by what one staff member called the “Terrible Three:” bureaucracy, politics, and limited resources. State policies for infrastructure and procedures can be cumbersome, and often don’t match the processes of arts grantees. States vary on whether Executive Directors are political appointees, but nearly all states have politically appointed councils; while some council members are deeply versed in their states’ arts eco-systems, others are less qualified and may have been appointed for reasons other than their expertise. This can make for a challenging oversight environment. Finally, even the top-funded states on a per capita basis have more applications than their limited finances can fund, and fewer staff people than truly accomplishing their missions warrant.

Leadership challenges are rife within the SAA sector, including an increasing quantity of churn in leadership and program-level staffing. A broader leadership challenge exists in the demographics of top leadership, which often do not match the populations the states serve, nor the arts organizations they support – which, themselves, are still not as diverse as their potential audiences.

Managing an under-resourced and over-taxed state agency is a difficult proposition, and most SAs have small staffs, tasked with much to do and too few people to do it. The pace of the work to be done also yields limited capacity for introspection and reflection about the work, which diminishes innovation and responsiveness.

The **constituencies** that SAs serve are not monolithic, with differing needs and assets. This is acute across the rural/urban divide, as well as between small and large organizations. This can make the requirements for grants onerous to small- and medium-sized organizations, rendering the SAA irrelevant to these organizations. Funding is still the most powerful attractor.

Further, arts **advocates** don’t always have strong voices in the political arena; some are well-connected, and others are disenfranchised from their states’ legislative processes. The SAs themselves can provide information to their legislatures, but they cannot lobby on their own behalf.

Access to **federal resources** is often a challenge for the SAs, which must apply for the 40% of the NEA’s funding that is mandated to go to the states. While the overall funding is guaranteed by the NEA’s authorizing legislation, states must still go through the panel process, with its attendant bureaucratic hurdles.

Finally, as with all entities in the arts sector, the SAs offer a **value proposition** that isn’t necessarily understood by the public, or, often, by the elected officials whose decisions are life-and-death for the agencies. When the arts are not valued, advocates

for this sector are constantly making the case, in addition to implementing programs and services.

Implications for NASAA

Staff members reflecting on the accumulation of NASAA members' strengths and vulnerabilities recognized that **NASAA must always reinforce the value of the arts**, both extrinsic (i.e., economic) and intrinsic (i.e., interpersonal understanding). NASAA's ability to support the SAAs case-making is an imperative that has guided the organization's work for many years, as is increasing visibility for the arts field in general and the role of SAAs within it. **Cross-sector relationships** hold potential here, as demonstrated in some of the conversation with other association that serve state entities (see separate report).

Can NASAA develop strategies that address the "terrible three" systemic issues?

Strong case-making materials can assist with the limited resources questions, and the solidarity that NASAA offers its members can mitigate some of the effects of in-state political wrangling. If each state bureaucracy is a system with its own complexities, then there are limits to peer learning; **deeper skills-building around adaptation and resilience** are a worthwhile response for a national service organization.

NASAA has long endeavored to design a suite of services that respond to members' conditions; expanded emphasis on professional development – particularly for new hires at SAAs and new council members – can address the knowledge gap that slows SAAs down. NASAA's networking and convening helps to make individual strengths available to the whole field as a resource.

NASAA

We posed a similar "superpowers" and "vulnerabilities" question about NASAA itself. NASAA's **primary superpower is also a vulnerability: the singularity of its mission**, which is focused on serving SAAs. Clarity about its purpose helps NASAA hone its message, strategies and actions; it also limits the organization's influence and visibility.

NASAA's position in the arts sector is **hidden** – the public barely understands state arts agencies, much less the national association supporting them. NASAA has a complex case to make, with a long distance between what the organization does and the effect it has, and no "big sexy program" with which to increase its visibility.

All present agreed that NASAA has a strong reputation as a leader in the field, marked by **credibility, responsiveness and stability**. (Stability, like singularity, was also cited as vulnerability.) NASAA's knowledge of and experience with SAA staffs and the field as a whole is a deep strength, making it a trusted resource that can back up just about any assertion with facts.

NASAA maintains a set of good **relationships** at every level in which it operates – with Congress and the NEA, and with its members. These members, it should be noted, are politically diverse, which gives NASAA a deeper credibility than organizations working in the same arenas that are viewed as being more partisan. Internal relationships are also strong, among board members, between the board and staff, and among the staff, who are recognized as smart, capable and hardworking.

Outstanding service provision is one of NASAA's hallmarks, maintaining a high degree of communication with its members, both formally and informally. As mentioned before, NASAA's commitment to providing practical information bolstered by research and facts is one of its differentiators from other national service organizations.

That said, SAAs have few places to turn for help, being viewed within their states' arts sectors as a resource more than a colleague, which can yield an over-reliance on NASAA. This manifests itself in frequent, sometimes intrusive, contact with staff, and conflicting demands on NASAA by its members.

NASAA is vulnerable, as are all organizations relating to government, to changing times and trends; the climate was described as "crazy" right now, and **many outcomes that affect NASAA are beyond its control.**

NASAA's **financial model** is a systemic vulnerability; the organization relies heavily on NEA funding, both directly for grants and contracts and through the states, from member dues that are supported by their national funding. Further, the inequality inherent in the funder-grantee relationship NASAA has with the NEA imposes some limitations on what can be said and done, and with how much candor.

NASAA experiences a gap between its capacity and its desire to provide excellent programs and services, limited by the size and depth of the staff and the financial resources available to support its programs. The organization is also challenged in adapting to and **managing new technology**, which is always cumbersome in the initial adoption phase and frustrating if, once mastered, the technology does not perform as expected. Additionally, several staff members wondered whether NASAA's structure provides room for **staff initiative and voice**, or is primarily responsive to the board and top leadership.

The challenges of **diversity, equity and inclusion** are present everywhere in the arts. For the NASAA staff and board, they manifest as limited race/gender/class/ability diversity, as well as limited diversity of perspectives about the field itself. NASAA leadership sometimes struggles with balancing consensus-driven decision-making at the board level and among member organizations with differing priorities and risk tolerance.

Finally, as indicated above, stability is both a strength and a weakness. The desire to remain stable can promulgate an aversion to risk.

Implications: Points of Leverage and Improvement

With a short time to reflect, the NASAA staff identified a few areas that may provide leverage for the organization. NASAA has the potential to use its **research capacity** to expand both earned and contributed revenue, by providing services to other associations that need field research (see separate report), and by increasing the volume with which NASAA trumpets its findings.

NASAA is in the curious position of **both leading and following its constituents**; increasing skilled communication to and knowledge of its members will enable the organization to push back against consensus-based decisions that are risk-averse. NASAA's leadership, supported by the staff, is charged to **frame the "why" behind its bolder strategies in a compelling way**. The staff expressed a desire for NASAA to articulate a clear, big vision for the organization and for the field, with fresh strategies to tackle both systemic and non-systemic issues.

Several issue areas were mentioned by the staff, including increasing the focus both on **diversity** and overall **case-making** for the arts. While NASAA experiences very little staff turnover, seeking to increase the racial and ability diversity of the staff is on the collective agenda. Adding more tools and training for advocacy at the state level is also a priority, to assist with charting future directions for SAAs.

In a constrained financial environment for the foreseeable future, the staff recognizes that managing its true **capacity** may mean a trade-off. In order to increase emphasis in some areas, other areas must diminish. The conversation among the staff included recognition that this does not mean small, cosmetic changes, and that choosing *not* to do things will be difficult decisions.

Critical Internal Issues

As the final segment of the meeting, which was acknowledged as too limited in duration to go very deeply, we sourced ideas to address the **capacity issues and self-care** for the staff as a whole. The opinion was voiced, and agreed with, that **innovation** at NASAA comes not from funding, or from the board; it is most likely to come from boosting the staff's ability to improvise solutions and then reflect on their implications.

Some staff members wondered whether using **technology** was a possible avenue to address some of the organizational capacity issues. Others wanted to look at functional changes, including re-thinking the conference support system so that it doesn't overwhelm all other work.

The suggestion was made to conduct an **internal analysis** to ensure maximum uses of staff expertise and to be pro-active in **preventing burnout**. This might include conducting a 360 degree human resource review to ensure that the distribution of labor fits the organization's purpose and work – are these the right jobs for the organization? Are these the right job descriptions? Is NASAA making the best uses of staff expertise? Can staff capacity be supplemented through other human resource strategies (such as interns, contractors, temps or other means)?

Further, endeavoring to keep the staff fully engaged in their work is a priority for every organization, and NASAA is no exception. Devising work plans designed to help the staff maintain a level of excitement about the challenges ahead, adapting to new work styles (which may include increased, albeit judicious, use of telecommuting) and supporting staff members to maintain their individual artistic practices were initial ideas put forward.

During a brief meeting evaluation at the close of this session, the staff affirmed the benefits of convening to look at the big picture, in a structured fashion. That all staff

present participated, in both small groups and the full meeting, was viewed as distinctly positive. There were general affirmations for the agenda and facilitation processes, as well as a desire to spend more time investigating solutions to NASAA's capacity issues.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa Mount". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right at the end.

Lisa Mount
Director
Artistic Logistics

APPENDIX: Staff Forum Agenda

NASAA Strategic Planning
Staff Planning Session February 21, 2017
APAP Offices: 1211 Connecticut Ave NW #200

Agenda

- 1:30 Welcome and introductions
- 1:50 WHY NASAA? Group discussion
 - Why is NASAA valuable/essential now?
 - Why do SAAs need NASAA?
 - Why does NASAA pursue the Knowledge Representation Community agenda?
- 2:20 NASAA members' superpowers and vulnerabilities
Discussion: Are NASAA member needs and assets the same as ever? Have new ones been identified?
- 2:55 Break
- 3:10 NASAA as an organization: superpowers and vulnerabilities
Discussion: What does NASAA need to get better at doing?
What are NASAA's leverage points: what superpowers (organizational or members') can we leverage to make the most impact?
- 3:50 Critical capacity/self-care issues
What areas of capacity and self-care for the staff does the plan need to address?
- 4:20 Next steps, meeting evaluation and thank you
- 4:30 Adjourn