

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

KNOWLEDGE ★ REPRESENTATION ★ COMMUNITY

NASAA Board of Directors Strategic Planning Retreat Summary September 14, 2016

During its September 2016 meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the NASAA board of directors held a strategic planning retreat. Against the inspiring backdrop of the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, the NASAA board and senior staff explored key questions initially surfaced during the board's May 2016 [Strategic Plan Assessment & Framing](#) session. This document recaps the structure and the major themes of the board's subsequent retreat discussions.



I. Future Forecasting

The morning began with an examination of trends affecting the strength of state arts agencies—the crux of NASAA's mission—and issues that will affect the work and well-being of our field in the foreseeable future.

What emerging trends (especially in the policy realm) will have the greatest impact on state arts agencies during the next five years?

- **Changing demographics:** State arts agencies need to understand, address and remain relevant to the needs of a rapidly diversifying population. State arts agencies also must engage younger generations (with very different cultural/social norms and expectations) in the arts and the work of state arts agencies themselves.
- **Diversity, equity and inclusion:** State arts agencies need help examining equitable distribution of resources, to reduce bias and ensure their funding is accessible. State arts agency staff and board leadership doesn't always reflect the cultural composition of public that we serve.

- **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA):** Preserving the arts endowment remains a priority. Members need NASAA to protect the agency and help turn the corner toward meaningful resource growth.
- **Economic uncertainty:** Many state budgets are exhibiting structural tensions between inexorably growing expenses and severely limited (or even negative) revenue growth. Governors and legislators keep trying to resolve this tension by reducing expenditures. However, the underlying structural gaps cannot close unless real revenue growth occurs, which is unlikely given how tax issues have been politicized. Although most state economies have improved in recent years, that is far from a universal trend. Not all state arts agencies have recovered resources lost during the last two recessions and many fear another economic downturn could be right around the corner. Some state budgets (especially those that depend on natural resource extraction) are already seeing sharp revenue declines, which typically lead to state arts agency budget cuts. All state arts agencies need to be able to preemptively make a case for their value during hard economic times.
- **Political acrimony:** Tensions and disconnects within and between parties have altered the way state and federal policy get made. Policy objectives get lost and common ground is hard to find. Unpredictable politics inhibits our ability to see into the future. It's difficult to sustain work on long-term policy agendas in this climate, where near-term emergencies necessarily command all our attention and advocacy resources.
- **The changing face of legislatures:** Political experience and knowledge of government are now viewed as liabilities rather than assets. Fewer elected officials—and fewer of their appointees—hold an in-depth understanding of government and public processes. So state arts agencies have to spend more time educating elected officials, council members, department heads, etc. Ironically, state arts agency efforts to adhere to accountability and transparency processes can be viewed by some policymakers as oppositional, even when they are required for accountability/legal reasons.
- **Attitudes toward government:** It is difficult to be a public servant at this time. Public skepticism toward government—which has long been the norm in some states, especially in the West—has tipped into outright disdain. This trend is intensified by legislators elected to deconstruct government from the inside out. It makes the work of state arts agencies much more difficult. It's also a major morale drain for state arts agency staff and is a staff recruiting obstacle.
- **Public disenchantment:** Some states are reporting low voter turnout and widespread public cynicism about whether personal participation in public processes makes any difference. Advocates somehow need to revitalize citizen engagement with local, state and federal advocacy. Citizen disengagement is a problem shared by many sectors and the arts may have a special role to play: mobilization of artists and arts organizations can be a force to inspire more participation. Artists might be able to gain a better understanding of the influence they have as advocates.
- **Telling our stories with data:** State arts agencies need to do a better job of aligning/translating data into meaningful narratives about their impact. Illustrating the impact of the arts is important but is not enough; we also need to illustrate the impact of government funding for the arts in general and *state arts agencies* in particular.

- **Technology:** Some state arts agencies feel hard-pressed to keep up with changing technology and new modes of communication.
- **State arts agency management:** Some state arts agencies are struggling to transform their organizational cultures—to reduce silos and barriers to communication and to raise their intergenerational and intercultural fluency. This is sometimes difficult to reconcile when operating within the bureaucratic constraints of state government.
- **"Arts and...":** Using (NEA) Chairman Jane Chu's phrase as a shorthand to highlight the intersections between the arts and other sectors, board members observed that this trend held both promise and peril for state arts agencies. Many board members observed that an increasing number of partnerships and collaborations between state arts agencies and other public agencies (health care, aging, economic development, military, etc.) strengthens our value proposition and widens our circle of stakeholders. Other board members registered concern that the absorption of state arts agencies into other departments had, in some cases, weakened the arts. All agreed that arts agencies fare best when they create/seize policy leadership roles.
- **Beyond the 501(c)(3) model:** State arts agencies have a longstanding commitment to the nonprofit sector that they cannot abandon without consequence. However, some of the most innovative artmaking—with significant community/creative impact—is happening in the unincorporated or commercial spheres. What do these creators and presenters need from the public sector? What does the public sector need from them? What do we have to offer? How do we measure this activity? Also, our old definitions of art forms and arts participation may be too limited. For instance, where do gaming and virtual reality fit into our portfolios?
- **Climate change:** We will inevitably see increases in the number of natural disasters affecting states. This will have a significant impact on state arts agency budgets and state arts agency constituents.

II. Rapid-Fire SWOT Analysis

To further structure its examination of the strategic position of state arts agencies, the board considered specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing state arts agencies. Whereas other conversations during the retreat were facilitated to elicit depth of reflection, this exercise was paced to ensure breadth of consideration of the assets and needs of NASAA's members.

State Arts Agency Strengths

- scrappy ingenuity
- knowledgeable, skilled innovative agency staff
- ability to convene, network, share information
- equitable and accountable distribution of resources (which leads to great relationships)
- access to powerful stories
- citizen ownership, engaging the public in multiple aspects of state arts agency work
- strong connections to voters ("We party with influential people.")
- bipartisan orientation

- stability and continuity (state arts agencies maintain long-term through lines amidst constant chaos, an upside of not being all that nimble)
- keepers of civic discourse, know how to disagree but keep talking
- good at collaborating, an increasing number of cross-sector partnerships
- keen understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of our communities

State Arts Agency Weaknesses

- articulating the role of government
- vulnerability to politics
- chronically undernourished
- resource limitations (budgetary)
- capacity limitations (even as state arts agency budgets have recovered, staffing has not)
- insufficient diversity of state arts agency boards and staff
- advocates have a high level of attachment to the way resources are distributed now
- not taken seriously as a policy player ("If you're not at the table, you're on the menu.")
- lack crisp, compelling case-making for public funding for the arts (our standard economic arguments don't always work)
- we try to be all things to all people, which challenges our ability to offer a consistent narrative
- it's advantageous to be connected across multiple agendas, but what's our own?
- capacity to collect data is limited
- data sets aren't well harmonized
- data resources are more geared toward adjudication than advocacy
- scant data on outcomes

State Arts Agency Opportunities

- access to NEA research (which has come a long way)
- we can invest even more in research
- this is a moment to tell the state arts agency story better than ever before
- the time is ripe for better and more strategic relationships with arts advocacy groups
- we can build systematic capacity (institutional and human) to produce outcomes
- arts are in an ideal position to advance pluralism in our society
- new partnerships can widen our base of support
- democratization of the arts (the "curatorial me") could potentially turn everyone into a stakeholder
- we need to actively shape our environment, rather than just analyze/recognize it
- STEM to STEAM
- arts and military
- business and education sectors shifting attention to career readiness/work force
- council appointees can be politically astute and connected (we may be underutilizing them)

State Arts Agency Threats

- economic downturns
- political acrimony
- attempts to undermine government as an institution
- the arts being used as a symbol of government waste
- whims of public officials who want us to do "special projects" (usually for free)

- getting compared against other public sector roles/causes (e.g., public safety or public health)
- burnout and battle fatigue (among agency staff and long-tenured advocates)
- appointees who don't understand or value the arts
- bureaucracy
- perceptions of art as an elite pursuit
- high levels of staff and council turnover combined with lack of a talent/leadership pipeline for our agencies
- civic unrest/violence

III. The Public Value of State Arts Agencies

To fulfill our mission of strengthening state arts agencies, NASAA needs to help our members make a convincing case for their relevance to government and to the public. The board explored both the enduring and evolving dimensions of this case for support.

Why does America need state arts agencies?

- The arts have a tangible **economic impact** on American communities. State arts agencies enable/amplify that impact.
- The arts are a **community development** boon. State arts agencies help communities use the arts to promote civic cohesion, good community planning and the exploration of important local issues.
- State arts agencies are the purveyors of a state's distinctive culture, history and character... **"all the things that our state holds dear."**
- State arts agencies **take privately held assets and convert them to public assets**, making them accessible to all. This is especially important given growing income inequality in the United States.
- There is a strong American commitment to public access to education, to parks, etc. We're all entitled to the opportunity to participate. The arts are a natural extension of this, we're not different/exceptional. **Access to the arts aligns with core American values.**
- We have the ability to **shine a light on the good/positive things** that are happening in communities. People need that light in a world that is too easily overcome by darkness. State arts agencies have an obligation to tell the story of the dark while lifting up the light.
- The most important work we do is quiet policy work in the background that **transforms how other state agencies do their work.** We're not just part of state government, we're reshaping it.
- State arts agencies **communicate the voice of the people.**
- **Leverage, leverage, leverage.** The rigor, accountability and stewardship attached to our grants validates the activities in which we're investing. It extends endorsement and encouragement for local sources to mirror those investments.
- State arts agencies put constituents through a rigorous process, one that inculcates accountability and **propagates best practices** among grass-roots arts groups.

(There's an upside to red tape!) Those best practices, in turn, help local arts constituents become more effective, more sustainable.

- **State arts agencies are one of the few funders that are available to all.** Major foundations aren't present everywhere, but state arts agencies are.
- **56 state arts agency laboratories** are pioneering 56 different sets of solutions to problems that many states face.
- State arts agencies are often the sole source of support for **individual artists**.

What's our distinctive value to government and the public?

- State arts agencies are **reservoirs of knowledge, experience and information**.
- State arts agencies draw power (real and perceived) by knowing our stuff. Beyond knowing about the arts, **we know how to get things done in the policy realm**. Let's leverage our power and influence.
- We're one of the few public agencies that involves the public in our decisions: citizens serving on councils, citizens involved in panel adjudication, citizens participating in our planning, etc. **We put the public back in public sector**.
- State arts agencies are citizen-driven. **We're models of responsive government**. We show what a public agency can do and exemplify how responsive government should behave.
- State arts agencies provide **effective leadership**. We influence state government, constituents, etc.
- We amplify, support and reinforce what the **NEA** does, making it highly relevant to every state.
- Our arts backgrounds give us a practical, deadline-oriented approach to our work. That's good for state government! **We get things done**. Not every state agency does.
- **We excel at herding cats**. We're also **adept at dealing with big egos and competing visions** and we can channel those energies for the greater good.
- State arts agencies are dynamic--more of an **opportunity model**—tied to the voice of the public.
- State arts agencies are a **powerful fusion of policy and principle**. Equitable distribution of funds and expert pursuit of initiatives all are guided and empowered by our field's widely shared convictions.
- **We can channel passion**.
- State government needs state arts agencies to provide stewardship for a **significant slice of the GDP**.
- **A state with a state arts agency is a stronger, better state**. Kansas became less prosperous, less attractive after the demise of its state arts agency.

- Government is inherently risk-averse, but SAAs have an opportunity to be **risk takers**, embracing the new, finding ways to improve, never resting on a standard definition of our work.
- Because SAAs are **nonpartisan**, we are generally **trusted by legislators**. We **give elected officials something to be proud of**, especially representatives from smaller communities. We can capitalize on that more.
- We're one of the few agencies that ever says "**thank you**" to elected officials.

To what end is it worth strengthening state arts agencies?

- To live life to its **fullest potential**.
- To improve **employment** opportunities. We help to employ vast hordes of people. We need to stay relevant to that sector, support it and promote it.
- To **address critical public issues**: incarceration, the environment, housing, education, etc.
- To nurture **America's cultural traditions**--those of our founders and those that are emerging today.
- To realize **positive impact on American communities** through public investment.
- To **equalize opportunity** and level the playing field. If we didn't exist, most arts money would go to large metro areas, fewer local investors would match public money, and a vast number of American communities would be left behind. Local support is uneven (local arts agencies don't exist/reach) everywhere. State arts agencies are a powerful antidote to the metropolitan elite holding a monopoly on a state's cultural resources.
- To provide the infrastructure to **sustain quality of life**. Without state arts agencies, state government could not ensure that a high quality of life is available to all regions of a state. Apart from a good quality of life being desirable, it's an advantage to a state's tax base and is especially relevant to states suffering "brain drain."
- To nurture an increasingly **diverse** population. State arts agencies can achieve those relationships and achieve those ideals as we're fulfilling our legislative mandates.
- To **elevate the role of the individual artist** in American society. Without the artists there is no art.
- To claim the future. We have **vigor, creativity and innovation capacity**. Legislators are hungry for that, and we equip them to speak to it substantively.

IV. Special Issue Breakout Discussions

For a portion of the retreat the board separated into four topical groups. Each group was led by a team of board members from NASAA's Planning & Budget Committee. This approach allowed the board to take a "deeper dive" into selected issues while also facilitating a high degree of board engagement.

GROUP A: How should NASAA help state arts agencies advocate for their own resources at the state level?

- Make sure **advocacy training** is embedded across all of NASAA's professional development programs and conference agendas. In particular, train and coach **new agency executive directors and chairs** on advocacy strategies and constructive arguments. Not all incoming leaders are equipped to be good advocates.
- NASAA provides excellent research and data synthesis, which is crucial for advocacy. But state arts agencies also need more **advocacy case studies** and more information on **advocacy best practices**.
- Advocacy best practices and how-to information should be tailored to state arts agency **executive directors** (in their unique position of needing to advocate without overtly advocating) and **council members** (in their unique roles as volunteers). However, NASAA also should provide best practices information geared toward state arts agency **constituents** and **advocacy groups**. Provide state arts agencies with tools they can easily promote/propagate among grantees.
- NASAA always needs to stay aware of state arts agency council dynamics: relationships between councils and staff, council members with unknown agendas or council members who don't feel it's their role to advocate. Nevertheless, state arts agencies would be stronger if **more council members were knowledgeable about advocacy** and if council members perceived advocacy to be their number-one job. NASAA can help raise awareness about this.
- NASAA could **help state arts agencies get ahead of crises** by spotting the danger signs and alerting them to hazardous political conditions. Can we systematically identify the **attributes of state arts agencies in trouble**? Or state arts agencies that are succeeding? Be proactive and provide checklists.
- Board members expressed an appreciation for **how NASAA handles crisis assistance** and customized advocacy triage: arming state arts agencies with good information, actively staying in touch, and following the state arts agency's lead on how to help—and how *not* to help. An on-the-ground NASAA presence is valuable in certain circumstances, but only by invitation from the state arts agency. Otherwise, "interference from Washington" is a hazard.
- Board members said there is widespread appreciation for the good aim and efficacy of NASAA's **behind-the-scenes advocacy work**, both state and federal. However NASAA's invisibility can be a problem, or lead to the misperception that NASAA isn't advocating. NASAA members need to better understand the behind-the-scenes aspects of NASAA's work. NASAA, and the states NASAA is helping, can do a better job of communicating the role NASAA is playing, even if it's not appropriate to promote that role widely to other audiences.
- States report mixed experiences with the involvement of **Americans for the Arts** (AFTA) in state level advocacy. In many states it has clearly been productive in boosting the capacity of advocacy groups, but in some cases it has been problematic. It's unclear what NASAA can do about this. Further board consideration is needed.
- Part of propagating good practices is telling the truth about counterproductive practices and being our own early warning system. **"If you see something, say something."**

- WESTAF provides **money for lobbyists**; many other state arts agencies beyond the western region would value that. Is there an opportunity for NASAA and **regional** arts organizations to collaborate on convening state arts agency leaders around advocacy goals?
- State arts agencies' relationships with **advocacy groups** run the gamut from highly positive to antagonistic to amicably dysfunctional. NASAA should define and promote the qualities and characteristics of positive relationships. Also, can NASAA be more involved in delivering better professional development to state arts advocacy groups?
- State legislatures maintain very **parochial** feelings, interests and motivations. NASAA can help state arts agencies **localize policy arguments** with research and data that's adaptable to multiple state environments.

GROUP B: How can NASAA help state arts agencies influence state and federal policy?

- Some state arts agencies currently influence non-arts policy at the state level in a number of realms (healing arts, veterans, corrections, housing and education) but most would like to **expand this influence**. It would be good to take stock of past policy influence success stories and secure better information about them. What was the impact? Did the advocacy group help? Gaining more context would be useful.
- NASAA could help members by looking at **arts caucuses** and other **legislative mechanisms** that state arts agencies are using to influence state policy.
- Apart from current federal relationships (with the NEA, the U.S. Department of Education and the President's Committee for the Arts and the Humanities), some new **federal policy partnerships** that NASAA could pursue to benefit state arts agencies might include:
 - U.S. Small Business Administration
 - Department of Agriculture Rural Development Agency
 - US Agency for International Development
 - Federal Emergency Management Assistance Agency
- Other **federal policy areas** with potential to strengthen state arts agencies are healing, corrections, housing, transportation enhancements and the National Museums Act.
- Reestablishing NASAA partnerships with the **National Governors Association** and the **National Conference of State Legislatures** will be important in the years ahead.
- What policy opportunities might reveal themselves through a convening of **creative industry commissions**?
- Would it be productive to approach the U.S. Chamber of Commerce or other national organizations that have influential lobbying activities through **private-sector** contacts?
- State level **historic preservation** activities are guided by a very strong federal mandate. Is such a thing possible for the arts?

- The above are all good ideas, but the board cautioned that NASAA should be **selective** in our federal policy priorities. We should look for high levels of **relevance** to state arts agencies and **timely** issues where a window for political success exists, or can be proactively created. We also should avoid efforts that are **redundant** to what AFTA or other advocates are doing.
- NASAA should place a premium on seeking **policies and partnerships that return funding** to state arts agencies and their constituents.
- Growing the **NEA's appropriation** remains vital to state arts agencies. Of chief importance are setting goals for the agency's appropriation levels, considering policies about how its resources are allocated and the future of the 40%. If we succeed in growing the NEA's appropriation, some states will have difficulty meeting the matching requirements, but that's "a problem we want to have."
- A leadership conversation about **how the NEA develops new initiatives** (and how NASAA and state arts agencies are consulted) might be valuable. A postelection NEA leadership transition might provide a natural opportunity.
- The **NASAA/NEA relationship needs to be articulated** in our plan in a strong yet nuanced way. It can be broad and positive.
- State arts agencies would not be well served to marginalize the NEA in our approach to other federal agencies. There's a role for **consultation and coordination**, and the good interagency work the NEA has done in recent years can provide a supportive context.
- One interesting policy shift NASAA might engineer would be to change the NEA **partnership agreement adjudication** process. NASAA could proactively review/support the quality of each state's planning process, leaving the NEA panel to focus more on goal attainment and higher level issues.

GROUP C: How can state arts agencies and NASAA meaningfully advance diversity in our sector?

- This is an issue area of concern to many state arts agencies, who are being thoughtful about the **multidimensional** aspects of equity, diversity, inclusion and access.
- We need to do **more than just add pretty words** to our plans. State arts agencies need to "walk the walk" in our funding, hiring and other practices.
- **Major obstacles** to state arts agency action include council appointments (which many state arts agencies cannot control) and hiring (limitations of the state personnel system). Low salaries and the low appeal of government as a workplace are also barriers to recruiting highly skilled and diverse individuals. There are strategies for overcoming these human resource obstacles that NASAA might share.
- Although our field wants to diversify further, there is some **existing diversity** within state arts agency staff and councils that NASAA could identify, convene, connect and empower.
- **NASAA's current work** is progressing on multiple levels: NASAA is addressing diversity in its governance and nominating work; NASAA is propagating information

on effective state arts agency policies, practices and programs; and diversity is a major component of the Assembly 2016 professional development agenda. **What could NASAA do next** that would be most helpful for state arts agencies?

- Keep propagating best practices and set a high bar for how state arts agencies should behave.
 - Share what other professional networks and other sectors have done, and adapt it to the unique constraints of government where possible.
 - Provide professional development sessions and opportunities for state arts agencies to talk about their challenges, assess their own actions and learn about effective strategies.
 - Intentional internships or mentoring cohorts might help us build the leadership pipeline.
 - Should we do a Leadership Institute focusing on diversity?
 - Uphold best practices in NASAA's own recruiting, hiring and governance. We're proud of NASAA for hiring a woman of color as CEO.
- **Poetry Out Loud** provides a good model of a program for which state arts agencies have recruited very diverse participants. Those high schoolers are the future of America. Can we tap into them further?
 - This work needs to be **grass-roots-driven**, not top-down.
 - This work can get bogged down with conflicting **definitions**, so clarity is helpful. NASAA's Governance Committee is defining diversity broadly: race, culture, ethnicity, LGBTQ, ability, rural/urban perspectives, etc. Grantmakers in the Arts is focusing very specifically on racial equity. That tight lens has a certain power. Is there a hazard to being too general?
 - NASAA should provide **multiple points of entry** into this work for state arts agencies. Don't assume a linear progression; different states have different needs at different times.

GROUP D: How might NASAA grow and diversify its revenue base through earned income?

- **Diversification of revenue sources** (both earned and contributed) is important to NASAA's sustainability. Impending elections underscore the importance of this; we can't necessarily count on the stability of federal resources.
- While state arts agencies can and will purchase special services from NASAA (above and beyond dues), it's not clear how large those prospects are given the financial woes and procurement headaches that state arts agencies face. NASAA should look to **other target markets**, which might include universities and foundations. This would be an important issue to explore with a business planning consultant.
- Would it be possible to secure corporate or foundation **underwriting for NASAA's earned income business planning?**
- Nearly 30% of NASAA's **requests for information** originate from outside the membership. Are any of them originating from potential target markets with resources to spend?

- **Research** is a strong NASAA asset that might be monetized for state arts agencies as well as other markets. Knowledge services and knowledge products could generate revenue.
- Perhaps we could work with a **technology for-profit** or consider shared ventures that would benefit both?
- **Hosting web content** for state arts agencies might be useful to some members with technical restrictions on what they can post themselves.
- **Publications sales** are an untapped resource.
- Look to the **Creative Capital** model for potential consulting ideas.
- NASAA is very good at **training** state agencies. Could we train other (non-arts) agencies in the areas of planning, research, accountability, advocacy or citizen involvement?
- Be wary of **mission drift** or financial targets that **divert NASAA staff time and attention** away from state arts agencies. State arts agencies need to remain NASAA's top priority.
- Stay aware of member perceptions. Any new income ventures by NASAA need to be recognized as **relevant/beneficial to state arts agencies**.
- Don't start adding service fees into the **membership** structure or "nickel and dime" members who already pay dues.
- It's not appropriate for NASAA to pursue **unrelated business income**.

V. Additional Suggestions, Advice and Cautions

- Knowledge services—including research, best practices, policy guidance, coaching and training—are NASAA's niche. **Members are thirsty for more information but have limited bandwidth to process it.** Package information with an eye toward different tiers or levels of detail that state arts agencies can opt into or out of, depending on their situation du jour.
- State arts agencies count on NASAA to **tell the truth** about what does or doesn't work. Nobody else will be honest with state arts agencies while also maintaining their best interests. It's acceptable to be more aggressive (bordering on interventionist) in seeking out information on what is or isn't working for state arts agencies.
- NASAA's value shines when it provides individualized consultations to states. Make sure that NASAA is organized to provide more **one-on-one coaching**, especially for states going through leadership transitions or crises.
- What NASAA can do that state arts agencies cannot is to **get the national attention** of influential people and organizations. Do this in a way that opens doors for members at the state level.
- Help state arts agencies with **"evidence way finding"** (determining what data is useful to track and sharing/interpreting relevant data). We're all swimming in a vast ocean of data, some of which is relevant and some of which is not. NASAA can help

state arts agencies discern the difference and see what's relevant to our work. State arts agencies rely on that curatorial guidance.

- NASAA should **focus on three to five key issues** over the next planning period. Be selective about the "deep dives" NASAA takes into different topics and issues. Work within NASAA's capacity and learn how to say no.
- NASAA's **organizational capacity** is one of the most difficult challenges to resolve. The budget and staff are maxed-out now, yet there is also a deep desire to pursue new work. The board observed that new partnerships or new income ventures must "leave behind" augmented capacity for core NASAA services. Otherwise new efforts won't ultimately benefit state arts agencies.

VI. "Red Star" Reflections

Reflecting on the totality of the day's retreat discussions, board and staff members answered two questions, first in writing, then aloud:

What idea or issue strikes you as most pressing for the future of state arts agencies? How might NASAA help state arts agencies to address that paramount idea or issue?



- **Advocacy** is the most important thing state arts agencies need to do better. NASAA can help convince policymakers about the importance of state arts agencies' work.
- **Leadership transitions**, turnover, diversity and generational transition pose major threats to state arts agencies, but also are an opportunity. NASAA can help members address these crossroads systematically and intentionally.
- **Diversifying partnerships** (e.g., with transportation, agriculture, economic development, etc.) will be essential to the survival of state arts agencies. NASAA can help by keeping up with research and providing toolkits on how to work with other policy domains.
- State arts agencies need to **stay true to our missions** while also finding ways to **embrace change**. NASAA can help states think anew while also using historical wisdom.
- **Diversity, equity and inclusion** are the paramount issues of our day. NASAA can develop intentional internships to increase diversity, equity and inclusion in the state arts agency future leadership pipeline.
- State arts agencies doubt their ability to **effect change** at the community, state and national levels. NASAA can help the most by sticking to its core mission (to strengthen state arts agencies), by customizing services, and by proactively helping state arts agencies learn what they need to know and do to be more influential. "We don't know what we don't know, but you do."
- **Inclusion** was the theme that was most prominent for me. NASAA should continue to share information and encourage best practices around diversity.
- We hold a winning value proposition because **all citizens benefit from the work of state arts agencies**. But we don't always embody or understand that value

proposition. NASAA can help by making sure state arts agencies understand who we are, why we exist and what strategies are working best.

- **State level advocacy** has to be a top priority. NASAA should help state arts agencies with advocacy structures, relationships and strategies. Consider developing a new protocol for AFTA-NASAA work.
- The biggest headline for the future of state arts agencies is **overall uncertainty**. NASAA can help by staying strong and providing leadership—maintaining a strong CEO and strong staff team that can tackle issues as needed, whether that be a research project or a federal policy intervention on our behalf.
- State arts agencies are **solution makers**. We're adaptable and can find solutions to big-picture problems around transition, relevancy and inclusion. NASAA can help by providing data, being proactive and convening us.
- State arts agencies need to **expand into nontraditional policy areas** to increase our influence and our budgets. NASAA can help by inventorying policy expansion trends and associated indicators (sources, means, evaluation, effect on budgets) and by sharing that information.
- State arts agencies need to double down on **advocacy and lobbying**. NASAA should educate elected officials at state and local levels and tell the story of what state arts agencies accomplish.
- State arts agencies will face increased competition and a continued volatile environment. NASAA needs to help us **leverage analytical, communications and advocacy skills**. We need help using data to navigate volatility. This means investing in leadership development and training for state arts agency staff.
- Agreed that state arts agencies are **vulnerable**. NASAA can keep state arts agencies at the table (not on the menu!) by pushing out the quality, aggregated best practices of our peers.
- Volatility and a **polarized political environment** are our biggest threats. NASAA can help by keeping dialogue open with state arts agencies about their changing environments and specific solutions, whatever will work. NASAA also needs to help us spread the word about why the arts and state arts agencies matter in this climate.
- **State arts agencies need help with everything**—all issues and on all levels! We look to NASAA to help us survive. So NASAA needs to resolve its capacity crunch so that it can offer the capacity state arts agencies lack.
- The state arts agency future is bright if we can **tell our stories better**. NASAA can help to spread the word through blogs and case studies, and can use the NASAA board and the state arts agency network to do this. We can address the hunger for hope and good news.
- State arts agencies will always need to focus on their **daily demands**, but NASAA can see further ahead. NASAA needs to help state arts agencies synthesize data and speak truthfully. Given our field's generational turnover, NASAA is our only institutional memory and needs to be sure it does our wisdom-keeping.

- The things that hurt state arts agencies the most are untouchable "**elephants in the room**" and **change resistance**. This board is willing to change and is committed to talking through difficult issues. NASAA can help state arts agencies do likewise by opening up dialogue and helping state arts agencies with issues that historically we've avoided.
- **State arts agencies are unique**—nobody else does what we do for communities—but it's getting harder to play that role. NASAA can help by highlighting best practices and innovative ideas.
- Our field is changing with ever-evolving understandings and definitions of **art and art making**. State arts agencies have an obligation to help with that and NASAA is obligated to help state arts agencies figure it out.
- State arts agencies operate in a changing context—our work itself, public value, participation in and consumption of the arts are all shifting. NASAA can help by staying in tune with what we need and **being our voice** so that the NEA and other policy authorizers understand state arts agencies.
- State arts agencies need **more voices of support** that are equipped to speak substantively to **why government should fund the arts**. NASAA can help with orientations to public service and ongoing leadership training, especially for council members.
- State arts agencies are **resourceful community development organizations** that partner effectively. That's different than it was 10 years ago and points to our field's capacity to change. NASAA can help by assisting state arts agencies to be more effective as community development partners.
- We can learn things from foundations or businesses, but state arts agencies are fundamentally different entities with different goals and constraints. Our field needs a **more forceful articulation of our distinct value**, our impact and our outcomes. NASAA can help articulate that crisply and be the "keeper of the flame" of why state arts agencies matter. We can stoke passion for the work of our field and start fires (the good kind!) when needed.
- State arts agencies evoke and promote **enduring American values** about citizen-driven democracy, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We can channel an **unapologetic patriotism** that appeals across the political spectrum. We're adept at that kind of code-switching and **political bilingualism**. NASAA can model this, and now is the time to do it.

VII. Thematic Trends

In addition to the individual "Red Star" reflections (transcribed above), it is useful to assess what the thematic headlines were during the retreat, since the most salient ideas may suggest areas of focus for NASAA's strategic planning. Below are two different lenses on that thematic analysis.

One approach to visualizing themes is to generate a "word cloud" reflecting the top 100 words used throughout the entire retreat. The size of the words reflects the relative frequency with which various terms were used. Another approach is to tally the frequency of "Red Star" themes mentioned multiple times during the final reflections on the day.

Most Prominent Themes: How NASAA Can Help

