

# National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

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## **CEO Report to Members October 12, 2017 Portland, Oregon**

Two years ago, almost to the day, we assembled at the NASAA 2015 Leadership Institute in Salt Lake City, Utah. Right after our welcome and our typical highly spirited roll call, we engaged in a whole-group discussion about the future and about change. We considered the environment of the day and shared aspirations about what the future could hold for state arts agencies and the arts generally. Here are a few observations you shared with us:

- There's a culture shift happening in how the arts are understood.
- We must roll with changes; think about how younger people interact with art and how technology adds to arts experiences. Will this change how arts education is driven? And how much of our work is driven?
- We must think about changes in our grant making and the democratization of arts funding. We still need to address inequity.
- We must reflect on why we do this work and connect the work to the role the arts play in people's lives today. We've got to make state government catch up!
- In considering the future, we must build on our assets. We sure can't rest on our assets.
- Are we planning around the need for multigenerational support systems? I remember Karen Paty making this remark, and we listened!
- Developing new leaders is critical. Our field is changing quickly. Don't blink!
- How will we navigate new political realities? (Was there a crystal ball in the room?) Little did we know just how new those political realities would be.
- A changing world means we, too must change. Will we be ready?
- We need an "out of this world" vision to blast us forward. (That was basically a direct quote.)
- The change all around us is monumental, and we need NASAA to help us change to meet the new day and thrive there.

You're all very wise!

These ideas (and others) were reinforced time and time again as I spoke with many of you individually. You inspired me, and you inspired Team NASAA; you also inspired our board of directors, and that launched an authentic process for NASAA's new strategic plan.

Never before have I been quite so taken with a planning process. No, I'm not feeling faint or feverish! It was still a planning process. There were days we were driven to the brink of madness and, as Kelly Barsdate can attest, we were also driven to boxes of limited edition fudge covered Ritz crackers. But months later as Kelly and I recently chatted, with our beautifully designed draft plan in the hopper, this planning process really made us smarter. We widened our lens. We heard from members, as well we always should, but we also jumped well outside of our echo chamber. We reached far beyond the field of state arts agencies, and by doing so, we learned more about ourselves, our environment and, most importantly, our potential.

For almost 50 years, NASAA has adeptly served state arts agencies. With a robust research and information services foundation, our data-driven approach to serving state arts agencies has indeed strengthened our members. You regularly tell us how much you appreciate that. It's work we can be proud of, work that has garnered results and work we must continue. Yet as the environment around us shifts significantly, state arts agencies need a new, additional service portfolio, one that prepares them to be highly skilled agents of change and agents of transformation.

The times call for this. There are seismic shifts taking place in how people connect to art, and for that matter, how artists consider and make art. These impact our work. The shifts in our political landscape are seismic as well. Low public confidence in government is informing how new elected officials engage. Their policy agendas are informed by that low public confidence, and that in itself creates some daunting dynamics. We are in a moment where we're literally transforming our advocacy strategies. Today's advocacy is inextricably linked to crisis leadership, media management and strategic communications. The climate we're experiencing calls for more comprehensive approaches to building the public will and political will needed for public investments in the arts.

These are the reasons this week's Leadership Institute curriculum has the focus it does, steeped in opportunities to expand your skills in leading during times of crisis, in building public will, and in navigating a new political climate. It's the reason that just last week we released a new guidance document on how to handle arts controversies in the public realm. Equipping state arts agency leaders to navigate the level of change we're experiencing requires NASAA to expand our skill set and our portfolio of services to you. That's how our new draft strategic plan is helping us to focus.

Here's another example. We all agree that advancing diversity, equity and inclusion is important work; it's critical. How can we best do that work? Beginning with solid data is an important place to start. That's why NASAA's current research activities include a focus on demographic mapping for your grant-making portfolios. It's important to see your grant awards in alignment with the demographics of your state. What comes next is a self-assessment tool to help you review your systems for bias and barriers, likely unintended, but likely present.

What comes after that cannot be handled by data and assessment alone. When a state arts agency embarks upon an effort to make grant making more equitable, you'll need to consider:

- how to talk to your constituents about this;
- how to navigate cultural diversity in those conversations;
- how to consider the human dynamics;
- how to manage emotional responses that are natural and inevitable.

These are difficult conversations for state arts agencies to facilitate, yet they're fundamental to leading the transformational work that's needed to achieve greater equity. Because the need for transformational work is a part of your reality, that makes it a part of NASAA's reality, and we're equipping ourselves to help you lead transformation.

In a number of ways during our planning process, you asked us to empower state arts agencies to navigate and lead your agencies in light of considerable change. You also asked us to help you figure out how to **steer** your agency ships toward change that will position you strongly for some really new days ahead.

That's what our new (draft) plan positions us to do. It compels NASAA to expand our capacity to accomplish a number of new things for state arts agencies, perhaps the most important of which is to facilitate your ability to lead transformative work at your agency. Adding a transformation based focus to NASAA's information based portfolio will equip us to strengthen state arts agencies for 21st-century success. This is the reason I mentioned being so dorkishly taken with our planning process. It really shifted our thinking, and now we're excited to stretch and bring you a new level of service. So, stay tuned.

Additional announcements:

- I encourage you to keep mindful that some of our SAA partners are working diligently on recovery challenges related to recent devastations. In some cases, recovery for arts stakeholders and communities generally will take years. Please keep our colleagues from Texas, Louisiana, Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Nevada in your hearts. Being out west, I'm also struck by the devastating impact of the wildfires. Keep California and Oregon in your hearts as well. If you connect to or know of resources that might be helpful to them, please let our colleagues know. Also, the National Coalition for Arts Preparedness and Emergency Response is connecting to the SAAs and continuing to be a resource. Suzanne Wise from Nebraska serves as NASAA's representative on the coalition. As I connect to funders, and as you do, please remind them that recovery efforts at this level are multiyear efforts that require resources. We mustn't forget.
- Also, two of our own executive directors in the room today are retiring. With bittersweet emotions, I'll share that this is their last Leadership Institute as executive directors. Would Philip Horn (PA) and Beth Klingenstein (ND) please stand and allow us to thank you for your service to the SAA field? Don't be strangers!
- You'll soon see a request for proposals (RFP) related to upcoming NASAA conferences. In 2018, we'll be in Baltimore celebrating our 50th anniversary. There's birthday cake in our future! We'll soon be looking for locations for 2019 and beyond, so keep your eyes open for that RFP, and consider hosting a future NASAA conference.