



Executive Directors Peer Session: Open Discussion

October 13, 2017

Pam Breaux welcomed everyone, noting that NASAA is a forum—and the Executive Director (ED) peer group is a special space—where our professional community can speak candidly with one another, receive affirmation and reality-checks, and seek solutions to current challenges. We are strongest as a collective field when each of our agencies is strong individually! Pam encouraged the group to make the most of its time together.

Peer group cochairs Karen Paty (ED-GA) and Michael Lange (ED-WY) reported on the results of a field survey conducted to poll EDs on their most pressing questions and concerns. Most of the responses revolved around an overarching theme of "relevance." EDs participating in the survey noted that state arts agencies needed to achieve relevance along many different dimensions: programmatic, political, demographic, operational and artistic.

Six small groups (preassigned to ensure a diversity of perspectives and experiences) discussed the theme of relevance, offering a variety of experiences and observations.

Group 1

- State arts agencies often can get swept up in **short-term events that dominate policy conversations or legislative actions.** (Examples: State budget approvals were derailed by legal debates in at least three states. Protests over justice issues have acutely affected the functioning of government in another state.) These events make it difficult to focus on the long-term relevance of state arts agencies.
- Even in states where appropriations are growing, **human resource shortages** abound.
- More **diversity** is needed on state arts agency boards and councils. Some agencies have made headway on the staffing side, but diverse governance remains a major obstacle.
- Sometimes a state arts agency becomes the **locus of political attacks** designed to exert pressure on council members or partners. These can capture a lot of the agency's bandwidth, leaving few resources to devote to other issues.
- Many **new governors** will be elected next year. These governors are increasingly new to politics and looking for ways to reshape—and reduce—state government. This can

Editorial Note

To support candid discussions, all state attributions have been removed from these notes. But if you see a comment that interests you and you'd like to learn more, please contact [Kelly Barsdate](#) at NASAA. We've retained records of the discussions and would be happy to refer you to colleague agencies with mutual interests!

create an opportunity for change, but it also introduces vulnerabilities if new administrations view the arts as superfluous or a ripe target for symbolic cutbacks.

- During the recession, a flat appropriation (with no reductions) was considered a huge "win" in a time of budget austerity. Flat budgets now have been "normalized" and that's problematic. **Limited resources can limit relevance**, creating a vicious cycle.

Group 2

- **Displacement** of populations affected by disasters, economic distress or climate change and rising sea levels is putting a huge strain on government resources and causing unpredictable population shifts. What's the role of state arts agencies? How do we keep up, especially when underlying infrastructure is compromised?
- Growth in the arts sector and economic growth can cause **gentrification**.
- Reaching native/tribal populations is a priority. These communities have unique needs and require a different approach to "relevance" than some other populations.
- Several states mentioned a persistent **digital divide**. Access to basic information infrastructure doesn't exist in rural areas or poor communities, posing an accessibility challenge for on-line state arts agency grants.
- When an agency's appropriation increases through **legislative earmarks**, it creates a bind for state arts agencies. Constituents think more grant funding should be forthcoming when they see the larger budget, but in reality those funds aren't available for grant making and don't benefit the state as a whole.
- This group noted the need to marshal the arts for **belonging, recovery and resilience**. Race relations are especially challenging right now, and the arts hold the potential to bridge those divides.
- How should the arts be part of state solutions to the **opioid crisis**? This crisis affects many states. How should our field respond?

Group 3

- Even if a state has a relatively large appropriation, these budgets pale in comparison to **growing populations** and the **magnitude of community needs**.
- "This is the **best job ever**. This is also the **most complicated job ever**."
- **Diversity, equity and inclusion** are very important. We have a lack of people of color in our industry, on our staffs and on our boards.
- **Burdensome bureaucracy** remains a dragon to be tamed. "Paperless" systems haven't ended the presence of too many state regulations that impede grants, procurement and work with partners/contractors. New government leaders come to power come with new paperwork.
- Nearly everyone in this group mentioned **personnel or human resource challenges**: not enough staff, needing different staff or different training, HR issues.
- Too often, **appointments** to state arts agency councils are delayed, causing governance problems, difficulty getting a quorum, etc. Getting quality/knowledgeable appointments is even more difficult. State arts agencies' ability to influence appointments varies.
- Don't forget the **joy** that can be found in our work. Partnerships and working in connection toward common goals can be inspiring.
- "We are **not discouraged**... but we're getting there!"

Group 4

- **Political churn** is changing everything. There used to be a regular operational order for lawmaking and appropriations. But lack of government experience in both the legislature and the executive branch is throwing curves and delays into both policy and procedure.

- Politics have gotten more complicated, too. Even **members of one party cannot agree** on anything. Many states are seeing divisions within majority parties, also a resurgence of legislative line items in some places.
- **Poverty and addiction** are pressing societal challenges in many places. State arts agencies need to step up to help.
- Being part of a larger department adds complexity to the authorizing environment. Some state arts agencies who are divisions of larger departments need to **compete with other divisions for their resources**.
- **Millennials** consume the arts very differently. State arts agencies have shifting constituencies and need to address millennials as part of the arts engagement equation.

Group 5

- **Rural** issues, access to resources and the digital divide were issues for this group as well.
- A **political "trifecta"** (the house, governor and senate all one political party) requires reframing the arts message.
- **Political controversies** can become lightning rods and partisan politics can divide a state's arts community. One example offered was from a state in which two schools dropped out of the Turnaround Arts program due to a controversy in which the program's celebrity spokesman affiliated himself with one side of a divisive state issue.
- Another lens on diversity is linguistic: state arts agencies need to be able to serve constituents speaking many **languages**.
- Not having a state arts **advocacy group** can put a state arts agency at risk. Opinions among EDs varied regarding the degree to which state arts agencies themselves need to lead the way on arts advocacy.
- Being part of state government means needing to **decode policy language**. For instance, the mantra of "fiscal responsibility" really means, "cut, cut, cut."
- Arts organizations and grantees that are not **people-oriented** need to reframe their work in order to survive. The emphasis needs to be placed on the public, arts consumers, arts audiences and communities—not just arts producers.

Group 6

- Political and social situations **beyond our control** have a huge impact on the work of state arts agencies.
- One state described a new level of **legislative dysfunction**, where the legislature is suing the governor and the governor is suing the legislature. The only thing individual agencies can do is keep our heads down and not become embroiled in a fight we can't win.
- **Term limits** necessitate continual education and re-education. Arts champions in state legislatures are leaving and need to be replaced quickly.
- **State budget shortfalls** abound. EDs reported budget shortfalls ranging from \$25 million to more than \$500 million. An added complexity is that lame-duck governors don't necessarily have the leverage to resolve such issues.

Looking Forward

After acknowledging the sometimes sobering realities of our work, peer group cochairs Karen and Mike invited EDs to share coping strategies, advice and examples of what's working. Thoughts offered included:

- **Democracy is sloppy**, the arts are sloppy and politics are sloppy. Our field is able to adapt and take advantage of opportunities as they arise. This is no place for cruise control. We'll have success if we establish credible working relationships with people—it's credibility that will let us find allies and work our way through the forest politically, culturally and socially.
- I look to the **young people** in our field to keep me inspired. They think in ways my own brain was not trained to, they problem-solve differently and they find new ways to work around political obstacles. They also have a different perspective, not always nonprofit, maybe it's for-profit. They're teaching us and we're paying attention.
- Our state is creating a **new 501(c)(3) support and advocacy organization**. It will increase our advocacy, and also will be a partner for projects that will allow us to free up more of our federal money for granting.
- We all need to become **masters of the legislative process**. But sometimes sanity comes from **knowing what to ignore!** There's a short list of things that require intervention, others can unfold more naturally with little risk. Learn the line—that line gives us freedom.
- I have the **serenity prayer** on my desk. Some things I just cannot change.
- We're facing a constant pressure to do more with less. But sometimes **it's okay to do less with less**. If we do fewer things but do them really well, we earn credibility.
- It's strategically important—but also affirming—to **build allies** and to recruit teams of people who can speak to the power of our work from different perspectives.
- I hired three **young people** as staff in the last year. People really want to do this work—they think it's important, they're smart and they're open to new ways of working. It's energizing to be around them.
- New hires in our state don't have grant-making backgrounds. Our agency is never going to make anyone whole with our grants, so **we see the future as moving more into direct services and a more entrepreneurial approach to delivery**. Our agency's artist career training services and our Change Leader cohorts are examples.
- **Please realize how lucky we are to have this gig**. We represent the arts in the United States of America! Of course it's complicated—it's government. But this is public service. It has peaks and valleys, but it has grandeur and honor, too. Having left and come back, I can tell you it's a special field. Let's never lose sight of that.