National Assembly of State Arts Agencies
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Tips for Preparing NEA Partnership Agreement Applications

September 2018

Each year, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) reviews state arts agency (SAA) applications for Partnership Agreement funding.[*] By observing the NEA's Partnership Agreement panel proceedings—and by examining SAA application narratives voluntarily shared with NASAA over many years—NASAA is able to identify best practices in strategic planning and to glean tips for SAAs preparing Partnership Agreement applications.

This document offers NASAA's recommendations regarding the main areas of focus of Partnership Agreement adjudication, through which panelists appraise the quality of SAAs' strategic plans as well as their efforts to develop and implement them. The NEA panels also give special attention to SAA work in support of arts learning and underserved communities.

Every state is different, so when preparing your agency's plan and application, consider those tips herein that are most applicable to your state's individual characteristics and your agency's situation. In addition, always follow NEA guidelines. For complete details on current Partnership Agreement application instructions, adjudication criteria and review procedures, consult the [Application Review Criteria](#).

Regardless of when your next NEA application is due, NASAA is a year-round resource on strategic planning methods and best practices for SAAs. Explore the [Strategic Planning Resource Center](#) or [contact NASAA](#) to learn more.

The State Arts Agency Context

- **State Character and Context:** Details about a state's character and context guide panelists' understanding of your agency. The NEA provides the panel with population statistics (derived from U.S. Census data) about each state, but it is helpful for your narrative to explain notable demographic shifts, geographic factors, policy priorities and anything else that is special about your state.

- **SAA Position in State Government:** Because some SAAs are independent agencies and some are embedded within other departments, it is helpful to describe your agency's placement within state government. It also is helpful to articulate any legislative or parent-agency mandates that influence or restrict planning, budgeting or programming.

- **External Challenges:** Externally imposed challenges—such as political transitions, budget exigencies, leadership turnover or government restructuring—are important to note if they impact your agency. Be honest about external challenges and explain how you have strategically adapted to them.

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[*] The NEA uses a staggered, multiyear review system for Partnership Agreements. State arts agencies file full-scale applications once every three years. These full applications are adjudicated by a peer-review panel. During the "off years," SAAs file shorter applications that don't undergo panel review.

- **SAAs with Strategic Plans under Construction:** The NEA does not require the dates of SAA strategic plans to align with the three-year Partnership Agreement application cycle, and SAAs may apply to the NEA while a new planning process is under way. If your agency is in this circumstance, make sure your timelines are crystal clear in your narrative to prevent panelists from becoming confused about past vs. current planning practices or accomplishments tied to an older plan.

Quality of the Planning Process

- **Inclusive Planning:** Inclusiveness is a fundamental aspect of strong strategic planning, so the panel will look for evidence that a range of stakeholders contributed to the development of a plan. Be sure to describe how your outreach efforts extended beyond the arts field to include other constituents. It also is important to highlight how your resulting plan reflects the demographic and geographic diversity of your state.

- **Public Engagement and Input:** Good planning employs a variety of outreach methods to facilitate substantial public engagement. Panelists have praised SAAs that used a combination of tactics to achieve broad input, including surveys, community based meetings, interviews, on-line forums, social media and coordination with partners from other sectors.

- **Transparent Methodology:** Transparent planning—sharing information about planning methodology and circulating draft plans—can make the process more effective and productive. Panelists have commended plans developed through an open process and have expressed appreciation for application narratives that clearly present the steps involved.

- **Process Details:** It is helpful to quantify the scope of the planning process. Details might include the types of constituencies engaged in planning; the number of forums or interviews conducted; the number of informants involved; survey response rates and more.

The Quality of the Plan

- **Reflect Public Input:** Panelists compare strategic plans to what SAAs report learning during their planning process. They have lauded plans that clearly are responsive to constituent input.

- **Aspirational but Achievable:** Panelists have commended strategic plans that are both ambitious and achievable. Goals, objectives and implementation strategies that are proportional to SAA resources are indicators of feasibility, according to panelists. Too many aspirations—or those that are unfocused—may foreshadow challenges in realizing them.

- **Clear Performance Measures:** Clear performance measures help to convey the intended impact of a strategic plan and demonstrate an SAA's accountability for its implementation. Panelists have praised metrics that are achievable, transparent and quantifiable.

Quality of Accomplishments and Implementation of the Plan

- **Implementation Through Lines:** Panelists typically look for connections between the constituent input an SAA receives during planning, its resulting strategic plan and its efforts to implement it. As you describe your accomplishments in your narrative, make sure these through lines are apparent.

- **Leadership Roles:** Panelists like to see how an SAA is using its authority and resources to play a leadership role—such as funder, convener, communicator or coach—in addressing strategic issues surfaced during planning.

- **Adaptations to a Shifting Environment:** Even the very best plan cannot anticipate every eventuality that may arise for a state arts agency. It's important for your narrative to note if you've had to deviate from or modify your plan to respond to new opportunities or unforeseen problems. Showcase your adaptive capacity and your ability to be resourceful.

- **Innovative Approaches:** What's new with your programs, services or operations? Panelists want to understand how your work is dynamic and to learn about any changes you may be making to your grant making, nongrant services, communications, partnerships or policies. Describe your efforts to define and address unmet needs and to adopt fresh approaches to perennial challenges.

- **Partnerships:** Partnerships increase the reach and benefit of SAA services and programs. Be sure your narrative notes any partnerships your agency has with entities (like federal agencies, other state agencies, local arts agencies, business entities, private funders, universities or other groups) that expand your expertise, influence or ability to deliver services. Clearly describe the nature of these relationships, including any financial components.

- **Evaluation:** This often is a weak area of SAA narratives. Explain how you are measuring your progress in implementing your plan and what methods you are using to evaluate your agency's programs. Also note how you are applying what you learn through evaluation to subsequent planning, programming or operational decisions.

Arts Learning

- **NEA Guidance:** Be certain to review the [Additional Information on Arts Education](#) published in the Partnership Agreement guidelines.

- **Alignment with State Education Goals and Standards:** Recognizing the complex policies and systems affecting education practices, panelists have praised SAA efforts to demonstrate arts education leadership, find meaningful ways to collaborate with state departments of education and align SAA programs with state instructional standards.

- **K-12 Classroom Support:** Panelists have commended various efforts to support K-12 arts education, including grants that enable curriculum based cultural experiences for students and classroom collaborations between teachers and teaching artists.

Other examples include programs that facilitate professional development or peer-networking for teachers and teaching artists.

- **Extracurricular and Lifelong Learning**: While the focus of NEA support is on arts education within schools, the NEA recognizes that cocurricular or extracurricular activities also are important. Panelists have praised lifelong learning programs as well as after-school and community based opportunities for cultivating creativity, especially those available to underserved communities. They also have commended traditional and innovative partnerships that make them possible.

Underserved Communities

- **Designated NEA Funding:** A portion of Partnership Agreement funding is designated for addressing the needs of underserved populations. The NEA defines an underserved community as "one in which individuals lack access to arts programs due to geography, economic conditions, ethnic background, or disability." Within this broad definition, however, SAAs are asked to specify their own underserved constituencies.

- **State Definitions:** Panelists look for a clear definition of *underserved* relative to a state's unique past history and current demography. Panelists have criticized SAA definitions of *underserved* that they find too broad or vague as well as those that do not tailor the federal definition to a specific state context. When defining *underserved,* consider which populations encounter barriers to arts participation. This may include immigrant groups, people of various racial and ethnic heritages (be specific), rural populations, inner-city populations, aging populations, people living in poverty, people with disabilities, incarcerated populations, communities recovering from trauma or disaster, and military service members and veterans.

- **Inclusive Planning:** Be certain to engage underserved populations in the development of your strategic plan's goals and objectives. Note in your narrative how their input and engagement were secured.

- **Implementation of Underserved Programs:** Be specific about how your grants and services assist underserved populations. Describe any other steps (through staff actions, policies, procedures or council governance) your agency is taking to address the needs of underserved communities.

- **Partnerships:** Panelists have praised collaborative efforts that build inroads into communities that SAAs may have difficulty reaching on their own.

General Tips

- **Facilitate Comprehension:** Each panelist reviews applications from more than 15 SAAs and reads hundreds of pages of application materials. To make your application easier for them to read: write clearly, highlight key ideas and goals, provide evidence supporting assertions, edit and proof thoroughly, use a clean and organized layout with sufficient "white space" to enable scanning, and adhere to NEA guidelines for font size, margins and narrative structure.

- **Support Materials, Hyperlinks and Websites:** Application support materials inform panelists' understanding of an application, and embedding hyperlinks in your narrative can connect panelists to examples of your agency's work. Too many hyperlinks, however, can be distracting. Double-check the accuracy of hyperlinks, and don't change the URLs after submitting your application, to ensure that they work when your application is reviewed. If the information you are highlighting is essential for panelists to understand, present it in the narrative rather than through a hyperlinked external source.

- **Budgets:** Budget pages should summarize on one page the resources devoted to your agency's salient "categories, programs, or initiatives." (See section E of the NEA's narrative requirements for SAAs.) As possible, use words or labels in one-line descriptions to align the budget with areas you have emphasized in your narrative. Budgets with no obvious connection to plan goals or programmatic accomplishments can be difficult for panelists to interpret.

- **Observing the Panel Review:** The Partnership Agreement panel review is conducted on-line and is open for public observation. NASAA and the NEA encourage all SAAs—including those not under review—to watch the proceedings live or to listen to archived versions. This is especially helpful in the year prior to preparing your agency's next Partnership application. Contact the NEA State & Regional Office for information on panel dates and how to participate.

- **Consult NASAA:** NASAA is an excellent resource for advice and information about strategic planning, model programs (see our State to State archive), evaluation and more.
  - For additional information on NASAA's observation of NEA panel meetings, contact NASAA Research Manager Paul Pietsch, 202-347-6352 x111, paul.pietsch@nasaa-arts.org.
  - For strategic planning advice or technical assistance, contact Chief Program and Planning Officer Kelly Barsdate, 202-347-6352 x107, kelly.barsdate@nasaa-arts.org.
  - For assistance with performance measurement and evaluation efforts, contact NASAA Research Director Ryan Stubbs, 202-347-6352 x115, ryan.stubbs@nasaa-arts.org.