



Executive Directors Peer Session September 19, 2019

Notes

Democratizing State Arts Agencies: New Models for Engaging the Public

Citizen responsiveness is one of the hallmarks of good government. From strategic planning to grant making and program design, state arts agencies have a long history of collaborative and community-driven decision making. As state arts agencies look to deepen these practices—especially to advance diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)—it can be useful to examine actions that can "democratize" our programs to embody public-sector work that empowers constituents and is truly "of the people, by the people and for the people."

Ideas around public service are beginning to change. A top-down approach to service is being replaced by working in partnership with communities. How should this change the way state arts agencies work?

Principles from DEI work, projects in the social justice space and locally driven creative placemaking efforts set a foundation that can aid public agencies as we move toward a new way of working with communities.

The peer session began with three examples of community-driven work:

South Carolina: [The Art of Community – Rural SC](#) advances the South Carolina Arts Commission's commitment to rural development through and creative placemaking. The program was launched in six highly rural, predominantly African American counties. Rather than taking preconceived programs to these communities, the arts council recruited small teams in each county and equipped them to reimagine their communities through an arts and culture lens. Each team created demonstration projects to grapple with a current community development issue. The teams are led by local "mavens" who work with the Arts Commission to drive the initiative.

Arizona: Recognizing that artists of color and artists living in rural communities were underrepresented in the artist-grant applicant pool when compared to statewide demographics, the Arizona Commission on the Arts embarked upon a major renovation of its [Artist Research and Development Grant program](#), in partnership with the Arizona Community Foundation. To guide the renovation, the Arts Commission enlisted a neutral facilitator to conduct focus groups and interviews with artists of color, artists from rural communities, artists working in diverse creative disciplines, and former applicants to the program, including those who had seen success in the process and many who had not. Artists were positioned as leaders in the process, were compensated for the time they spent providing feedback and consulting on revisions, and remained part of an advisory cohort as changes

were implemented. Results included a streamlined two-stage application process, fresh review criteria meant to honor a variety of artistic approaches and training, and the opportunity for applicants to submit proposals in writing or through video or audio recordings. The revised program launched in 2018 and applications more than doubled in the first year.

Indiana: Successful community development practices position the arts as central in the lives of citizens. This work requires sustained effort, over time, to deepen understanding and build trust between arts providers and the communities that they serve. The Indiana Arts Commission developed the [Community Engagement Ladder](#) as a tool for articulating what meaningful work can look like and how those efforts can grow over time. One of the main thrusts of this tool is to move agencies from an "audience development" mentality to a true community-centered approach that embodies partnership building, joint decision making and civic engagement.

Session participants generated their own ideas and approaches for democratizing the work of state arts agencies. Some ideas included:

Grant Making

- Rethink panels (composition and process) to bring greater equity to grant decisions and avoid rewarding grantsmanship.
- There is more than one definition of excellence.
- Make sure every county or region of the state receives funding. If you're not getting to a particular area, find out why—and take responsibility for reducing the barriers.
- Standard grant programs won't work in every community. Sometimes you may need to start with a technical assistance strategy or just LISTEN before developing any funding approach.
- Consider waiving matching requirements. Fast-track funds that have lower matching and documentation thresholds have made public funding available to smaller groups.
- On-line applications may not be accessible to all. Is there an alternative?
- Decentralizing grant making is another way of empowering decisions closer to the local level.

Coalition Building

- What other funding or programming partners exist in the communities you are trying to reach? A state arts agency working alone may not be able to sustain work, but a coalition effort might have deeper roots and longer staying power.
- Sometimes being an advocate, connector, educator, partner or networker is as (or more) important than being a funder.
- Work through trusted local anchor groups as fiscal agents, hosts or conveners.
- Where present, local arts agencies and historic preservation groups can be helpful partners.

Trust Building

- Show up!
- Work to understand local needs. Demonstrate commitment by listening before advancing a state agenda.
- Learn how a community authentically defines itself, don't superimpose your own definitions.
- Diversity, equity and inclusion training for all staff, council members and panelists may be needed to reduce unconscious bias that will undermine trust no matter how well-intended a state arts agency's efforts might be.

- Our attachment to words *art* and *excellence* and *accountability* may do more harm than good. We may need new language and terminology.
- Folk and traditional arts projects can be a useful point of entry. State arts agencies can build on authentic cultural traditions.

Frameworks that Empower People

- Do we need new definitions of Return on Investment? How do communities themselves define success?
- Pilot programs may be useful because they allow state arts agencies to learn in stages and adopt an evaluative mind-set about what works. Participant-driven evaluation approaches are especially important.
- Engage youth to conceive and execute new programs. Placing young people in positions of leadership can shift power dynamics and bring new energy to community development efforts.
- Historically marginalized communities may need leadership training to help arts development efforts gain traction. (But remember there is more than one way to lead!)

Tough Decisions

- Build your tolerance for risk and messy work.
- Unless new resources are becoming available, state arts agencies need to be prepared to redirect funding away from some communities in order to support others. How can we do this thoughtfully, build buy-in and minimize backlash?