



# The Equity GAP Project: Initiative Overview

September 2022

Between January and September 2022, the Ohio Arts Council (OAC) and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) collaborated on the Equitable Grant Making Assessment Pilot Project, a partnership known as the “Equity GAP Project.”

## Goals

The objectives of this joint initiative were to:

- Diagnose equity strengths and weaknesses in the OAC's grant-making systems.
- Identify practical actions the OAC could take to attain greater equity in how its grant funds are distributed.
- Demonstrate an assessment approach attuned to the public sector that could serve as a model for other state arts agencies.
- Contribute to collective state arts agency knowledge by sharing key insights and lessons learned.

## Scope of the Assessment

The Equity GAP Project examined the OAC's general operating support (GOS) programs: Arts Access (for organizations with annual operating budgets less than \$50,000) and Sustainability (for organizations with budgets greater than \$50,000). These grant categories were selected for study because they represent a large portion of the OAC's grant investments—and because they offered an important opportunity for the learning to be influential. Many state arts agencies devote substantial resources to GOS, and flexible multiyear funding is an important mechanism for capacity building. It's therefore critical to our field to understand how to improve access to such funding.

From the outset, NASAA and the OAC acknowledged that equity is dimensional and intersectional, encompassing many different aspects of human experience. While recognizing the importance of such factors, it was necessary to set some parameters for this project. To that end, the assessment focused on four demographic and geographic groups that are historically underserved: BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and/or people of color) populations, rural communities, low-income areas and people with disabilities.

## Methods

The assessment took a mixed-methods approach, mining a variety of input streams to understand funding patterns in Ohio as well as the larger context for advancing equity in grant making. Components included:

- **a systems review of OAC policy documents and grant procedures**, to serve as a baseline for understanding the OAC's current funding structures;
- **a scan of other state arts agencies' policies** (e.g., guidelines and evaluations) to ground the project in the state government context and learn about grant-making norms and innovations potentially useful to Ohio;
- **a literature review of equity audit resources** produced by or for other grant makers, to gain ideas from outside the state arts agency sector;
- **a top-line summary of OAC awards**, to understand the agency's program allocations;
- **a statistical and geospatial analysis of OAC grant-making data**, to benchmark Ohio against other states and examine the demographic particulars of its Arts Access and Sustainability investments;
- **confidential interviews with OAC staff**, to mine their expertise and learn about their equity concerns and aspirations relating to grant making;
- **confidential interviews with NASAA staff**, to understand the equity opportunities and constraints commonly encountered by state arts agencies;
- **confidential interviews with Ohio organizations in historically underserved communities**, to provide feedback on their funding needs, experiences and perceptions;
- **a field survey** that garnered responses from 392 arts and community organizations, to gain additional perspectives on OAC practices and the needs of Ohio arts organizations.

To provide impartiality and harness high-level evaluation expertise for the project, NASAA secured the services of an independent consultant, [Angela Han](#). She led the assessment design, conducted the qualitative research with stakeholders, administered the survey and facilitated implementation support conversations with OAC staff. NASAA staff took the lead on the grants data review.



## Findings and Recommendations

The research revealed numerous strengths in the OAC's current systems as well as opportunities for ongoing learning and improvement. Examples of key findings included:

- The OAC has demonstrated a strong commitment to flexible funding in the form of operating support, which comprises 75% of the agency's total grant expenditures—more than most other state arts agencies.



For more details on the methods, findings and recommendations, visit:

[https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa\\_research/equity-gap/](https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/equity-gap/)

- OAC staff are perceived by constituents to be highly supportive and responsive.
- While every county in Ohio receives grant funds through multiple OAC grant programs, a large portion of GOS dollars are concentrated in larger, urban arts organizations.
- Rural organizations are receiving a substantial share of GOS grant awards (15%), but their share of total grant dollars is small (5%) in comparison to metropolitan grantees.
- Some constituents are uncertain about eligibility criteria for GOS funding.
- Among interviewees, grant sizes are perceived as small relative to the needs of organizations and the complexity of the state's requirements.
- The staffs of the OAC's GOS grantees are more racially and ethnically diverse than that of the overall state population. Board leadership is less diverse.
- A strong majority (77%) of constituents agree that the OAC should continue to prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).
- While support for DEI exists across the entire state, rural and Appalachian organizations are less likely to see themselves as a part of DEI work.
- There is broad support—among organizations of all types and sizes—for the idea of increasing resources for small organizations.

**Twenty-two action recommendations** ultimately were offered for consideration, to help the OAC reduce obstacles to GOS funding. Examples included:

- Continue the practice of providing multiyear operating support.
- Communicate frequently and clearly about eligibility factors.
- Simplify the GOS grant application process.

- Increase award amounts for small-budget organizations.
- Consider reducing or eliminating the cash match requirement.
- Challenge the budget-driven funding formula.
- Evaluate the current entry points for rural, BIPOC and disability organizations.
- Develop an entry point or supports for organizations serving low-income communities.
- Adopt a practice of defining and routine reporting on equity metrics.
- Collect more detailed panelist demographics.
- Create more capacity for community connections and outreach.

## Project Impact

The Equity GAP Project included consulting components to help the OAC reflect on the assessment findings and formulate action plans to weigh, refine and implement action recommendations. As of this writing that process has just begun, but early efforts suggest that the agency already is utilizing insights from the Equity GAP Project in many ways:

- forming staff teams to articulate and implement next steps
- reviewing and revising grant guidelines
- simplifying application budget forms
- revisiting data requirements
- increasing the allocation of funds for small organizations
- citing the research findings in agency budget requests
- incorporating action items into the agency's work plan

In addition to informing the work of the Ohio Arts Council, the Equity GAP Project is positioned to influence other state arts agencies across the nation. NASAA is sharing the results, using the project to facilitate reflection about ways that state arts agencies can continually strive toward equitable funding. The project is serving as a study model and a catalyst for conversations about data collection and assessment methods. And the initiative partners are considering how the process can be improved and might be replicated for other states in the future. For more information, contact NASAA Chief Program and Planning Officer [Kelly Barsdate](#).

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