

Green Paper

The Future of the Public Voice in Arts Advocacy

Authored by the State Arts Action Network (SAAN)
A Network of Americans for the Arts

Overview

While public support for arts and culture and arts education is enjoying strong levels of support, the converse is true for funding for the arts (public, foundations, private, etc). It is easy to throw up one's hands and blame the recession, but that wouldn't be an effective strategy or view of the full picture. While funding alone is not the measure of support, it does play a substantial role. State Arts Action Network (SAAN) members, Americans for the Arts, and many local arts organizations have recognized the importance of advocating the value of the arts to elected officials and the public alike. SAAN members at the state and local levels, along with Americans for the Arts, have participated in important and substantial efforts to educate and inform elected officials and the public about the economic impact, educational opportunities, and cultural heritage that the arts provide to individuals and to communities across the nation.

History

Advocates for the arts have always existed, as one can see by visiting almost any small town and stumbling upon a Carnegie library or museum. For generations, the ultra-wealthy supported the arts as a public service. As these wealthy individuals decreased their giving or invested their funds in other worthy causes, foundations and other entities began to supplement funding for the arts and helped sustain artists and arts organizations. This remained a fairly informal process until the mid 20th Century when organizations like Americans for the Arts and statewide "citizens for the arts" organizations were formed.

The early 1990s were a high water mark for support of the arts on the federal level, with the National Endowment for the Arts receiving its highest appropriation ever, \$176 million. In 2001, state arts councils collectively received \$450 million in funding. This declined to an all time low in 2004 with \$281 million in funding. This amount continued to increase each year from 2004 to 2008 before the recession occurred. In 2009, arts councils from across the country felt the recession with deep cuts in state level funding for the arts. NASAA reports in 2010 that the states received legislative appropriations totaling just over \$297 million.

It is worth noting that the State Arts Action Network (SAAN) was formed in 2004, when two previously independent national arts organizations, the State Arts Advocacy League of America (SAALA) and the National Community Arts Network (NCAN), ratified an agreement to become part of Americans for the Arts.

The joining together of these two organizations was a first step in creating a statewide advocacy and service organization in every state. SAAN members strengthen and build the arts advocacy and service infrastructure in the United States at the national, state, and local levels. Among other outcomes, they help shape public policy, initiate effective advocacy campaigns, set research agendas, provide meaningful professional development, and provide peer-to-peer networking opportunities.

In 2009, the members of the Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education Network joined the SAAN as affiliate members, bringing the network to 71 advocacy and service organizations serving 46 states. The SAAN is a mobilizing force today, and into the future, as the public voice in arts advocacy.

Necessity

Few would argue that a concerted arts advocacy effort is necessary for success today in America. While many elected officials support the arts, the fact remains that when budgets get tight, the arts are one of the first things on the chopping block. This can certainly be seen as many states are coping with billion-dollar budget deficits. Cuts are never easy, and we often hear about a state arts agency being cut at the same level as other state agencies. While these across the board state cuts seem ‘fair’ on the surface the fact of the matter is that most non-arts state agency budgets are much larger to begin with, and it is commonly known that a state arts agency budget is usually a miniscule percentage of the overall state budget. Some states have received huge cuts in the last year, as high as 70% from the previous year or biennium’s budget allocation. This is a trend that must stop. Citizens groups and advocates continue to work hard to ensure that policy makers understand the return on investment financially, educationally, and culturally. This is more important now than ever before as organizations that represent competing priorities are learning to leverage their message of need in more advanced ways, many learning from strategies developed and used in the arts advocacy arena.

In reviewing the arts per capita spending for each state, a pattern emerges. Broken out by per capita the range is \$0.15 in California to \$6.02 in Hawai’i.¹ In those states with no statewide arts advocacy and service organization, not one state cracks the top half for funding. If one looks at the top ten states for arts funding per capita, one sees a list of states with robust arts advocacy groups. Granted, a governor or powerful state legislator can have a huge influence on the state’s arts budget, but a substantial, coordinated grassroots advocacy effort is indispensable.

In today’s economically challenged environment we know that advocates for the arts have staved off elimination of state arts agencies and deeper cuts that had been on the negotiating table during the budget debate. In today’s economic environment statewide arts advocacy organizations are critical to the message delivery system. These active and engaged organizations are able to harness the voices and constituent pressure of hundreds

¹ Legislative Appropriations Annual Survey, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, January 2010

of thousands of individuals across the nation. This is evidenced through recently increased membership and action in these organizations and in Americans for the Arts.

Future

The members of the State Arts Action Network are supporting Americans for the Arts' aggressive goal of a one million member grassroots army. To achieve this number will take everyone's help and hard work. This effort will also serve as a means to grow the base of advocates in each state. Americans for the Arts, through its members' input, sets the national arts advocacy agenda. But in each of the states, it is the SAAN member who sets the agenda through the help of their members. Success occurs for public funding for the arts when grassroots supporters speak with a united voice at the local, state, and federal levels. With increased research, messaging, and collective planning SAAN members, regional entities, and Americans for the Arts can reach our common goals to support the arts.

Americans for the Arts and the individual SAAN member organizations use a wide range of tools to set in motion grassroots advocacy efforts that influence elected officials and increase support for the arts. Although common now, six years ago when Americans for the Arts and the SAAN members began using their online legislative action sites (Capwiz), this was a relative novelty. For the first time, SAAN members and Americans for the Arts agreed to share grassroots activist lists and develop a division of labor for federal and state issues. From its humble beginnings six years ago, with only a few hundred activists, 2009 boasted a record number of more than 150,000 grassroots arts activists across the nation representing every state and major city. This is a prime example of how collaboration breeds success.

As we look towards the future, plans are in place to develop a local capacity in the Capwiz on-line tool which is currently used at the state and federal levels. Soon, a grassroots activist can go to an arts Capwiz site, and see federal, state, and local action alerts, receive information about the current status of events, and get information about their elected officials. By developing these one stop web based and accessed sites, it is hoped that more people will be engaged at the click of a keyboard – be it at their desk, on their lap, or on their phone.

Savvy arts advocates have realized the power of social networking. A majority of state arts groups have Facebook and/or Twitter accounts. They are “linked in” to other arts professionals and have developed an online presence. Successful advocates are combining this with effective web sites that act not only as information sources for members, but also as tools to gather emails addresses, share stories, and accept contributions. One can only assume that an organization's online presence will play a larger role in effective communications and that the primary way arts activists will wish to receive information is through electronic means.

The field of arts advocacy needs substantial research about how to talk about the arts in order to effectively educate an elected official and to convince a grassroots activist to get involved. While research has been done with regard to arts education talking points, little

to no substantial research has been done about the arts in general. Arts leaders need a variety of talking points combined with other arts related research to continue to be effective. We must remember to speak from where our audience is listening and command the message we deliver.

In the *2009 National Arts Index* study produced by Americans for the Arts, it was noted that “Americans have increasingly shown that they want to be artists, want arts organizations in their communities, and want to study and enjoy the arts – all of which is evidenced by the data. The concern for the future is that we don’t know (1) if the current capacity is sustainable, or (2) how today’s capacity – both physical and human – will match tomorrow’s demand for the arts.”² With this thought in mind, in the past few years, there have been at least five examples of statewide arts advocacy and service organizations merging in order to share resources and eliminate competing goals. One could expect this trend to continue for the next few years where issue based arts advocacy and service groups join with umbrella groups, like Americans for the Arts or the individual SAAN members, to accomplish their goals. This also makes sense from the political perspective as many elected officials do not distinguish various arts forms or voices, but rather see the arts in all disciplines and formats simply as *the arts*.

The public is overwhelmed by calls for assistance, for donations, memberships, and to join a cause. The arts movement is aware of the many competing priorities in people’s lives. To this end arts advocacy and service organizations are engaged in research, strategic initiatives, branding, and good old fashioned hard work, to find ways to quickly and effectively educate the public about the value of and need for the arts, to demonstrate why they should be involved, and to make it easy for them to participate. Engagement is one of the hardest challenges facing arts advocacy and service organizations. In today’s viral environment, news is reported every moment, images and information are instant, and the need to participate with instant gratification is the new normal.

Conclusion

Arts advocacy and service organizations will continue to fight for the arts and will do so more effectively and efficiently because they are changing with the times, taking advantage of new technologies, and engaging people in new and different ways. Arts activists will also evolve by learning new ways to communicate effectively while understanding that the personal relationship with policy makers remains key to long term change and impact.

So as we look to the future of the public voice in arts advocacy ... the key to success may well be the act of listening!

² National Arts Index. Americans for the Arts. 2009