

State Arts Agencies 2.0

Yogi Berra once said, “The future ain't what it used to be.” Yogi could have been talking about the arts in America in general or state arts agencies in particular.

State arts agencies have done great work over the past 50 years. Julia Lowell, in her book *State Arts Policy: Trends and Future Prospects*, gives a concise historical synopsis of that work.

“State arts agencies have played a key role within the U. S. system of direct public support for the arts. They have broadened the reach of the federal arts agency, the National Endowment for the Arts, by implementing its programs at the state level. They have made resources available to the arts at the local level by providing technical assistance, training, programs and funding to local arts agencies. And they have directly supported a wide variety of arts-related institutions and activities, largely through competitive grant awards to artists, arts organizations, schools, media organizations, other government agencies, and other cultural and community groups throughout their states.”

Thanks are due to the pioneers of this movement. They did important work in convincing governors and state legislators of the importance of having a state agency dedicated to the arts. A tip of the hat is also due to the 56 state and territorial arts agencies currently working across America. Each is acting to do the absolute best to serve its constituents with the resources available. This service is not provided through grant making alone, which is how many citizens come to learn about their state arts agency. It is provided through the work of volunteer boards and talented staff, dedicated public servants who seek to assist people in their states to create, educate, market, govern, promote, manage, collaborate, and partner. These are veteran and emerging leaders who provide advice, counsel, praise, constructive criticism, and maybe even shoulder to cry on.

The collaboration of federal, state, and local support has ignited an explosion of arts opportunities throughout the nation, from sea to shining sea. These opportunities have expanded access for all citizens to express themselves and to experience the work of others. I have always felt that the motivation for this important work was best captured in a quote from the late Robert E. Gard, Professor Emeritus of Community Theatre, University of Wisconsin:

"If we are seeking in America, let it be for the reality of democracy in the arts. Let art begin at home and let it spread through the children and the parents, and through the schools and the institutions, and through government. And let us start by acceptance, not negation- acceptance that the arts are important everywhere, and that they can exist and flourish in small places as well as large, with money or without it, according to the will of the people. Let us put firmly and permanently aside the cliché that the arts are a frill. Let us accept the goodness of art where we are now, and expand its worth in the places where people live."

While state arts agencies are proud of our history, we know that some fundamental changes are already under way. Imagination and creativity are at the heart of life in the 21st century. New art

forms seem to be appearing daily. There are new ways of participating and the line between artist and audience continues to blur in the age of the prosumer (a consumer who also produces work). Access to new tools of production and distribution are expanding. The fictional line between the nonprofit and for-profit aspects of our field is all but gone – certainly in the minds of our audiences.

Ben Cameron of the Doris Duke Foundation reminds us that we in the arts are not alone.

“We are in the midst of a realignment of cultural expression and communication – a realignment that is shaking the newspaper and television industries, the publishing and book industries, and (in an indication of what may be yet to come) has left the recorded music and music distribution industries in disarray. Indeed, the crisis the arts face today is not financial. The crisis we face is one of urgency and relevance: the financial merely defines the resources we bring to bear in confronting the crisis.”

State arts agencies have already waved goodbye to the old model of the state arts agency as simply a funder to artists and arts organizations. We are well into reimagining the state arts agency needed for the future. Let’s call the new version, state arts agency 2.0.

The new narrative for the state arts agency field is one that grounds us in our service to the citizens of our state while also embracing the expanded context for our work. It is based in the concepts of **public value** and **expressive life**.

This first concept of **public value** was brought to our field by Mark H. Moore – thanks to the visionary leadership of The Wallace Foundation and Arts Midwest – through the crucible of the START (State Arts Partnerships for Cultural Participation) Program. In their 2005 publication *Creating Public Value Through State Arts Agencies*, Mr. Moore and Gaylen Williams Moore proposed that we change the very transaction upon which state arts agencies are based. It is no longer good enough to simply give a grantee funding or to think of that grantee as our only constituent. Moore reminds us that our true constituents are the citizens of our states. It is their needs that we are seeking to meet in partnership with artists and arts organizations.

Theoretically, if we do so, the citizens will tell their legislators, our agencies will be perceived to be relevant to the work of the state, and state arts funding will be maintained and possibly increased.

This uncovering of the true constituent, and change in perception of the relationship between “state arts agency and grantee” to “state arts agency and partner in providing public value”, may be subtle but it is profound. It changes the way we interact with our partners and what we ask of them. For example, we now ask those partners that receive our grants to tell us how their work is meeting the needs expressed by the people of their communities and to document how they articulate that to their state legislators and local leaders. We then share those best practices with other partners.

The second concept of the new narrative for state arts agencies is **expressive life**. This concept has been offered by Bill Ivey, former chair of the National Endowment of the Arts and director of the Curb Center for Arts, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University, in his book

Arts, Inc.: How Greed and Neglect Have Destroyed Our Cultural Rights. As Ivey defines it, expressive life is made up of two components: heritage and voice.

“Heritage constitutes one half of expressive life: the part that is about belonging, continuity, community and history; it is expressed through art and ideas grounded in family, neighborhood, ethnicity, nationality and the many linkages that provide securing knowledge that we come from a specific place and are not alone.”

“Voice, the other half of our expressive life, is quite different: a realm of individual expression where we can be autonomous, personally accomplished and cosmopolitan – a space in which we can, at times, even challenge the conventions of community or family heritage.”

Basing this new narrative for the state arts agency field in the concept of expressive life knocks down barriers (nonprofit, for-profit, informal; fine art and folk art; professional and amateur; art and public policy). It sets our work in a broader ecology, allowing us to make more meaningful connections to other creative industries and public policy issues, enriching our work on behalf of all citizens.

With public value and expressive life fundamental to the narrative, Julia Lowell’s articulation of the future of state arts agencies becomes even clearer:

“We envisage a system in which state arts agencies serve primarily to connect networks of individuals and organizations organized around issues relevant to the arts. While state arts agencies will continue to provide financial resources to selected organizations and individual artists, as much or more of their attention will be spent interacting with members of various networks: building coalitions of policy advocates, gathering and distributing information, convening groups with similar interests and concerns, and indentifying areas of opportunity for artists and arts organizations. Much of their work will center on improving arts education, growing the creative economy and expanding arts participation.”

So now that we have imagined the future, how do we get there? We must:

Continue to write the narrative (as described above)

We must deepen and share our various experiences in working with public value and expressive life.

Build upon past/current strengths of our field.

Build upon our strengths – to convene, to distribute resources fairly – without politics, to provide thought leadership, and to provide technical assistance.

Ensure that our past does not become an obstacle for our future.

Our funding structures are such that we have created a system of entitlement, with large sums of money tied up with a chosen few organizations. A long outdated hierarchy of art forms and organizations has guided the distribution of resources. This while the number of arts organizations has expanded exponentially and resources have not kept pace. We must imagine a new way. Words like “quality” are thrown around, not to discuss mastery of a particular art form but to put down one form in order to raise up another.

We must also eliminate the pervasive victim mentality that has taken hold of far too many arts organizations that we serve. Small and shrinking budgets have stunted too much of the field's imagination and destroyed too much of its self esteem. "There is no money." "Nobody cares about the arts." "Poor us." "There is nothing we can do." "If only someone understood." If our world view is too limited, it will not allow us to see that these are in fact the best of times for the arts. Everybody, every day, is dependent on and in contact with the work of an artist or other "creative" (designer, architect, etc). Our limited definition of what the arts are has made it difficult for the public to understand our role in this work that shapes their daily lives.

Open ourselves to the opportunities of the future

We must develop new partners – inside and outside of government. These partners may come from education (science and math), creative industries, sustainability and green energy, tourism, and workforce development, among others. We must embrace new art forms and new strategies for funding, promotion, and technical assistance. All of this work will provide new opportunities for artists, arts organizations, and the communities that they serve.

Peter Drucker said, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." I predict great work ahead.

Read More:

Cameron, Ben. "Remarks at Arts Learning Xchange" Arts Midwest, July 16, 2009

http://www.artsmidwest.org/files/09MinnesotaSpeechfinalPDFforWebsite72209_2.pdf

Gard Ewell, Maryo and Warlum, Michael. *The Arts in the Small Community*, 2006. Madison, WI: Robert E. Gard Wisconsin Idea Foundation, 2006.

Ivey, Bill. *Arts, Inc.: How Greed and Neglect Have Destroyed Our Cultural Rights*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2008.

Ivey, Bill. "Expressive life and the public interest" DEMOS *Expressive Lives* 2009

http://www.demos.co.uk/files/ExpressiveLives_web_ii.pdf?1246871840.

Lowell, Julia F. *State Arts Policy: Trends and Future Prospects*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008.

Moore, Mark H. and Williams Moore, Gaylen. *Creating Public Value Through State Arts Agencies*. Minneapolis, MN: Arts Midwest, 2005.

<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/ArtsParticipation/Pages/creating-public-value.aspx>