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Emerging Trends in State Arts Policy

State arts agencies (SAAs) face growing economic and political challenges to their key role in the U.S. system of public support for the arts. In the mid-1960s, when the SAAs were founded, state economies were strong and public funding of the arts had widespread support. Over the past 20 years, however, financial and political support for state funding of the arts has grown precarious. Voter demands for more-limited government have compelled all public agencies to persuasively justify their activities or risk elimination—a task that has proved particularly onerous for public arts agencies because of difficulties in measuring the benefits of the arts and controversies over publicly funded art works. In most states, arts funding has lost ground relative to other expenditures, spurring many SAAs to reconsider their missions, role within state government, and operational priorities.

A new RAND report, *State Arts Policy: Trends and Future Prospects*, by Julia Lowell, argues that some forward-thinking arts agencies are adopting strategies that could not only strengthen their position within state government, but also improve their capacity to serve state residents. Lowell synthesizes the findings of a study commissioned by The Wallace Foundation on the evolution of SAAs—their missions, budgets, and funding priorities.¹ She also describes the emergence of a new approach to state arts policy that could have important implications for its future direction.

The new approach is characterized by its use of three strategies:

- an expanded mission cast in terms of service to all state residents

¹ The study findings are detailed in three earlier RAND reports: Julia Lowell, *State Arts Agencies 1965–2003: Whose Interests to Serve?* MG-121-WF, 2004; Julia Lowell and Elizabeth Heneghan Ondaatje, *The Arts and State Governments: At Arm's Length or Arm in Arm?* MG-359-WF, 2006; and Laura Zakaras and Julia Lowell, *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy*, MG-640-WF, 2008.

Abstract

This effort examined the strategies being used by innovative state arts agencies to adapt their roles and missions to today's changing financial and political realities. The approach these agencies are taking has three main characteristics: a shift in mission from bolstering arts providers to serving people and communities, a heightened interest in strengthening ties with state officials, and the use of a broader range of policy tools appropriate to the new mission.

- a commitment to working more closely with political leaders and other state agencies
- a broader range of policy tools more suited to the new mission.

If these strategies succeed and spread, state arts policy could look quite different in the future.

Expanded Mission

At the heart of the new approach is a shift in mission from bolstering arts providers to serving people and communities. In the past, SAAs considered their primary mission to be financial support of artists and nonprofit arts organizations in their states. Through a competitive process, they awarded grants to those determined to be the best, in this way seeking to benefit state residents by increasing the supply of available high-quality arts.

By many measures, this mission has proved successful: Across the country, thousands of artists and arts organizations now practice their art, and state and local arts agencies control the bulk of public arts funding. By other measures, however, it has not: The Americans who participate in arts activities that SAAs help make possible are relatively few in number and are overwhelmingly white, well-educated, and affluent; and the

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proliferation of arts providers has led to intense competition for limited state funds. To their dismay, SAAs have found that support for public arts funding is sporadic and that the arts typically do not make it onto the list of state government priorities.

Forward-looking SAAs have responded to these problems by taking on a more expansive mission. They focus on how to induce a broader cross-section of state residents to participate in the arts. They hope to draw more state residents into engaging experiences with art, to boost the earned income of artists and arts organizations, and to build public support for themselves by increasing the visibility and reach of their programs.

Closer Ties to State Officials

Beginning in the 1960s, SAA staff and board members typically designed their own programs and made their own decisions about whom and what to support. As part of this process, they relied on significant input from the arts community but almost none from state political leaders. This “arm’s length” approach to state government was designed to lower the risk that arts funding would be politicized.

However, in the 1990s and 2000s, SAA leaders in some states began strengthening their relations with state officials in response to severe political and budgetary difficulties. These SAAs pursued systematic public advocacy, more-effective use of their board members’ political connections, and closer collaboration with other state government agencies. Most important, they grew more willing to align their goals and programs with declared state government priorities. Their objective has been to convince state officials that the arts—and their agencies—contribute to important public policy agendas and are highly valued by large numbers of state residents.

Broader Range of Policy Tools

To expand their missions and strengthen their relations with state officials, forward-looking SAAs are employing a wider range of policy tools. SAAs committed to improving arts

education in the public schools or to developing creative economies in their states are finding that convening, advocating, and gathering and distributing information are effective ways to influence policy and leverage resources.

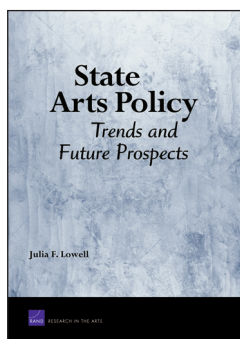
This does not mean that SAAs will stop making grants. SAAs still tend to see themselves as the sole funding source for certain artists, arts organizations, and activities they view as vital to the healthy cultural life of their states. But SAAs seeking to expand their missions and align their programs with state priorities will have to draw on all of their resources, nonfinancial as well as financial, to achieve those ends. The particular issues that SAAs focus on and the tools they use will differ by state.

Prospects for the Future

The three strategies align with best practices described in public-management literature, which claims that public agencies are the most successful when their mission is seen as highly valuable by state residents, when their mission is widely supported by those that control resources, and when they draw on all resources and policy tools available to them and to their partners.² If these strategies strengthen SAAs, as they appear to be doing in some states, and if more SAAs follow suit, SAAs will be able to serve artists and arts organizations—as well as state residents—better than ever before.

SAAs that pursue this new approach will focus increasingly on building coalitions around issues relevant to the arts. Although they will continue to provide financial resources to selected organizations and individual artists, they will devote more attention to other policy tools, such as convening groups with similar interests and gathering and distributing information. Much of their work will center on improving arts education, growing the creative economy, and expanding arts participation—objectives that can only be achieved in strong partnership with others. ■

² Mark H. Moore calls this the “strategic triangle” (*Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).



This research brief describes work done for RAND Education and documented in *State Arts Policy: Trends and Future Prospects* by Julia F. Lowell, MG-817-WF (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG817/>), 2008, 42 pp., \$21, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4577-5. This research brief was written by Laura Zakaras. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RB9402>

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