



Communicating Impact

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The arts agency field collects a large volume of data, ranging from grant reports and economic studies to surveys and evaluations. It can be a challenge, however, to shape this information into effective communications that relay how the arts contribute to healthy and vibrant communities and a good return on investment. This session discusses ideas for using information as a communications asset for telling the story of what state arts agencies do and what the arts sector achieves.

Facilitators

Eric Ashby, Grants and Research Manager, Indiana Arts Commission

Gary Gibbs, Executive Director, Texas Commission on the Arts

Lauren Rhoades, Director of Grants, Mississippi Arts Commission

Liz Shapiro, Director of Arts, Preservation and Museums, Connecticut Office of the Arts and the State Historic Preservation Office

André Zhang Sonera, Deputy Director of Operations & Strategic Partnerships, Indiana Arts Commission

Liz Shapiro: It's important to communicate data well for different audiences. How do we show that the arts are necessary? Especially when we're working so hard. Today will be a brainstorming session.

Lauren Rhoades: We want to help folks know we exist, that, for example, we are not the same as the museum. Storytelling is important as well as data.

Eric Ashby: We are connecting data with internal decision making.

André Zhang Sonera: All the while, we must be accountable and transparent for taxpayers.

Small-Group Discussion Questions

- What barriers are you encountering to effectively communicating your impact?
- What are your favorite data sources?
- How do you convince people about the veracity of your data?
- What technology are you using to help with your capacity to harvest and communicate your data?
- What partners are invaluable to you for this work?
- What partners do you wish you had?

Report Outs

These encompass various state arts agencies' responses to the above questions.

Table 1: Barriers: We want to find a way to get away from the economic-impact narrative to try a fresh approach. Capacity: Harvesting is not too difficult, but analyzing and reporting creates capacity issues. Getting stakeholders to report back is a problem (too many surveys). Favorite data sources: ADP, NASAA ranking data, SNAAP [Strategic National Arts Alumni Project]—college educated arts alumni, dual employment data, etc.

Table 2: Using strategic planning listening sessions, finding effective ways to store and use collected data. We'd like effective tools to pull data to create a story to share with legislators. Board members reach out to those receiving arts infrastructure grants—good promotion.

Table 3: Barriers: Military health: Sometimes info that goes out is not what was meant. Evaluation: Info comes back (photos, videos) and it's a challenge to know how to process the data. Oklahoma is doing two-minute videos in partnership with a PBS station. Working with people and getting the stories out.

Table 4: Some state arts agencies (SAAs) have legislators on their board; some have their own state advocacy group, which helps with the workload of the SAA. We try to track which legislators need more attention, then give our board members a single sentence to share that shows impact.

Table 5: Tools: Artificial intelligence (AI) as a data mining tool—though some states have limits on using AI. There is value to educating applicants/grantees up front about the data the SAA needs, who grantees reach, adding that requirement to their final reports. Some SAAs have data portals that grantees can use and public can see.

Table 5: Barriers: Staff capacity, considering stakeholder needs. Data sources: Grant programs (Smart Simple), Google Notebook. What other states are using AI policies? Possibility of NASAA starting a Salesforce affinity group to learn how it can be used?

Table 6: There is a lack of trust in grantee-reported data (hard to be sure it's accurate). How to combine data and story to make them more useful. Quantity vs. quality—sometimes quality is more impactful than big numbers. Fact and figures are out of fashion; storytelling is where it's at now, anecdotal stories. Somehow, sharing someone's personal experience with the arts doesn't translate to funding.

Table 7: Barriers: Relationship with state department of education; how to work their and SAA's data together. Sometimes we need to simply educate about who we are as an SAA. What is missing in our final reports that could help impact? In a red state, sometimes data doesn't matter; we must be sure data is relevant to each audience.

Further Discussion

Data collection helps us focus on our staffing needs and what they need to focus on. Staff should be aware of data to help them know why they are doing their various tasks.

Important to ensure impact is not always about money—which is challenging for some legislators, who are all about budget.

Challenge to tell story in a purple state—need to tell two stories, which can be a capacity issue.

Panelist Presentations

Gary Gibbs: Data must come from Texas to be effective for legislators. Texas Cultural Trust produces a State of the Arts report, which Gary uses in his presentations to legislature. Texas Commission on the Arts also relies on data from Texas state comptrollers office—so there's credibility with legislators. Gary takes main numbers and creates simple, visually appealing slides to present, including return on investment. He shares how teaching arts improves student achievement, as well as civic and physical/mental benefits.

Attendee: My state uses a respected state university to run the data.

SC attendee: We use data from state economic development association.

Lauren Rhoades: We used data to create a map of underserved counties (they had not received a Mississippi Arts Commission grant in past six yrs). We collect data using

Foundant for final reports. We track where staff does site visits (data used internally). We do 15-20 "Meet the MAC" grant presentations; count how many attended, then which applied for grants. We track events attendance, do focus groups, and do a multiyear qualitative and quantitative survey on impact of arts in schools.

External data used: Mississippi Department of Education, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, NASAA, Americans for the Arts.

We share our impact numbers in annual report (which goes to several stakeholders), our legislative report, annual appropriations requests, individual calls to legislators, in determining our outreach strategy, and with advocacy partners.

Sometimes we share photos with legislators. For visual impact, we share color photos of organizations that were funded, black-and-white photos of those not funded.

Mississippi is a relational state; stories are very important.

We share our arts integration (arts education) study highlights, which shows the better performance of arts-integrated schools versus others.

We also will share grantee spotlights. Some will include five-minute video on a grantee plus information on the grant program.

Eric Ashby, André Zhang Sonera: Use data as a storytelling tool. For Indiana's Bond Bank Project, we put data in a spreadsheet; Microsoft Power BI tool parsed data and pulled it into visuals, pulled data from Foundant and created dashboard to learn where gaps in funding are, including over a span of years.

Context is key: Identify area of impact relevant to state, then figure out how SAA can impact that change. Use federal Final Descriptive Report data. Environment, impact (outcome), output (data), context (indicator: progress, peer states [NASAA data]) tell the story.

Connect strategic planning and programming: state plan establishes impacts; SAA makes plans around those.

Align data collection and investment: Matched responses from artist surveys to points of investment.

Track technical assistance: Time spent on specific programs shows further investments.

Data capacity strategies: ensuring data hygiene, tracking longitudinal data. Use AI tools to summarize data, keywords counters. Develop report templates. Partner with other state agencies, higher education.

Helpful resources: map builder, relationship mapping, NASAA grant-making dashboards, community data, community connectedness/participation, U.S. Census data, National Association of Counties, state historic preservation office.

Other tools: Canva, Tableau/Salesforce