

The Need For Information



A Brief Report on the Sunset of the National Standard

**What We Have Learned and
What It Can Tell Us to Guide
Future Data-Standardization
Considerations for Arts Grant
Makers**

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Illustration by Barbara Carter, from *All in Order: Information Systems for the Arts*, published by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (1981)

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Executive Summary

This report, commissioned by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), explores the history, revisions and lessons learned from the National Standard for Arts Information Exchange (the Standard). It provides future considerations for arts data taxonomies.

History and Background

The National Standard was developed in the late 1970s to address the fragmented and inefficient information systems used by the NEA, state arts agencies, regional arts organizations and arts grant makers at large. It aimed to standardize data collection across federal, state and regional arts entities, facilitating meaningful analysis and use of arts data on a national scale. The Standard created a taxonomy for compulsory federal data along with a broader set of data definitions that could be used by arts organizations and grant makers to track their programs, projects and activities.

Over time, the use of the Standard focused on the fields required of state arts agencies and regional arts organizations to complete NEA Final Descriptive Reports.

This important legacy of the Standard remains in place along with the taxonomy, even if it no longer is being updated comprehensively on a regular schedule. The Standard has allowed for the input of long-term longitudinal data describing state, federal and regional arts grant making since the 1970s. These data are utilized by arts agencies, researchers and the public to understand the reach of public support for the arts, to evaluate programs and to provide accountability for government investments. Collection, maintenance and analysis of these datasets will continue.

Federal reporting requirements and associated systems remain in place—along with the roles of NASAA and the NEA—for the purposes of collecting, cleaning and analyzing data from the states. However, *the Standard will no longer be a governing taxonomy associated with these data*. Instead, NASAA and the NEA, as stewards of the data, will continue to make field-informed decisions relevant to future state and regional data collection requirements.

Key Revisions

Over the course of its history, the National Standard underwent [five major revision cycles](#), the most recent occurring in 2014 and being fully implemented in 2016. Reporting requirements for NEA Partnership Agreements have been revised since this latest change.

- **1984 Revision:** Focused on refining data categories and ensuring compatibility without requiring agencies to convert old data
- **1991 Revision:** Revised disciplinary codes, added ZIP code, and added Project Race and Grantee Race codes
- **1994 Revision:** Modified several activity and institution codes, added arts education and associated codes as separate fields

- **2001 Revision:** Introduced changes to improve data accuracy and relevance, including new codes for activity types and project descriptors
- **2014 Revision:** Refined fields for beneficiary data collection, added a new module for reporting Activity Locations and retired less-useful fields to align with NEA requirements

Lessons Learned

- **Value of Standardization:** Standardized data collection, especially in the early days of digital records, was crucial for reducing conflicts and enabling congruent fieldwide impact data.
- **Engagement in Data Decisions:** Involving multiple perspectives from the arts grant-making community in data decisions is essential for successful adoption of any data taxonomy.
- **Compulsory Data Collection:** Comprehensive data is achieved only when participation is mandatory. Adoption of the Standard and reporting of federally required fields was implemented universally. All other aspects of the Standard were rarely used, and NASAA research has shown that states have adopted widely divergent data fields outside of federal requirements.
- **Challenges in Alignment:** Differing priorities and goals between federal and state/regional partners make ongoing consensus a challenge.
- **Underutilization and Diminished Knowledge:** Given the long-term use of the Standard and the changes in its utility over time, field knowledge of the Standard has declined. Also, common misperceptions persist about the differences between the Standard and NEA Final Descriptive Report data. The sunset of the Standard as an updated data taxonomy does not diminish the value and the need for standardized data on public investments in the arts.
- **Financial Data Limitations:** The National Standard is not ideal for organization financial analysis. Grant amounts, expenses and revenues collected according to the Standard are limited to project level data in most cases.

Future Considerations

- **Changes in Technology:** Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, can analyze complex and unstructured data, which creates implications for standardization practices and utility.
- **Broader Field Understanding:** Challenges to collecting and maintaining relevant and viable data sources to describe the broad impact of the arts remain. To improve integration among multiple sources, future revisions to data or new standardization efforts should consider contemporary data sources and technology, which will thereby expand knowledge in the field. For example, unique identifiers are more useful if they are implemented across multiple data sources.
- **Continued Data Collection and Education:** Despite the sunset of regular updates, data collection will (and should) continue for reporting purposes. Standardization practices and updating the required fields are only one aspect of data improvement. Education, professional development and implementation support are as important to improving data quality as changing data fields.

- **Broader Data Ecosystem:** Future data-gathering efforts could consider a broad approach, to understand the variety of data that can describe the arts ecosystem and how grant-making data can be aligned or effectively gathered in conjunction with other efforts.
- **Adoption without Compulsory Mechanisms:** Future taxonomy developers will have to handle the key challenge of adoption beyond government accountability. Ideally, an arts data standard could go beyond federal requirements to encompass state, local and private funders, along with individual organizational adaptation.

Conclusion

The National Standard has played a significant role in standardizing arts data collection, but consistently updating the Standard in alignment with NEA reporting requirements is no longer seen as an effective use of resources. Fieldwide input into the complex considerations for future data taxonomies is essential. Future efforts should account for emerging field trends, technological advances, and the current practices of arts grant makers. The evolution of technologies, especially in terms of "big data," cloud based databases and artificial intelligence, may necessitate an approach as visionary as that undertaken by the original National Information Systems Project.

History and Background

The state arts agency (SAA) movement grew and gained momentum with the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965. The regional arts organizations (RAOs) came into being in the early 1970s, with Mid-America Arts Alliance, the first RAO, founded in 1972.

At the outset of the federal-state partnership in the arts, funders began managing and organizing data related to the grants they were awarding and the project activities they were supporting through these partnerships. By the mid- to late 1970s, microcomputers became widely adopted by businesses for everyday tasks, and state and regional arts organizations found that these tools were ideally suited to the gathering and organization of grant and activity data.

By the late 1970s, many public arts funders were gathering information and using computers to organize that information, but there was no compatibility across what different arts agencies were gathering. As Tom Wolfe, executive director of the RAO the New England Foundation for the Arts, put it:

Each of us was developing computer systems for arts management. Each of the systems was being developed independently. Each system, when developed, would be unique. We would all be collecting information in our own way and there would be no way to compare what we were collecting. We also realized that the situation could be very different. We could stop working independently and begin collaborating on one very powerful national system. [We] could begin to compile nationally compatible arts information.

A "handbook" for the newly developed national arts information system was titled *All In Order: Information Systems for the Arts*, authored by Mary Van Someren Cok and published by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies in 1981. As *All In Order* explains, the National Information Systems Project (NISP) was formed from an initial gathering of regional arts organization directors in 1977. The focus of NISP was to establish national standards for information systems in public arts agencies. According to Van Someren Cok:

In late 1977, five regional arts agency directors, who envisioned the exchange of nationally compatible data on the arts, commissioned John K. Urice, then Administrative Director of the Fine Arts Council of Florida, to conduct a study of information systems in public arts agencies. The intent of the Urice study was:

- to determine what information systems existed within state and regional arts agencies;
- to determine what systems were planned;
- to determine what information was needed;
- to evaluate the feasibility of nationally compatible information systems;
- to recommend how to proceed in the future.

The Urice report, completed in 1978, highlighted the fragmented and inefficient nature of existing information systems used by arts agencies and underscored the necessity for a unified approach.

The report served as a feasibility study for establishing a "national system of 'working definitions'" to ensure "that information and reports developed from [arts agency] systems would allow meaningful analysis and use."

The National Standard for Arts Information Exchange was developed as part of the National Information Systems Project, initially to address the need for standardized information systems within public arts agencies. The project was spearheaded by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. Begun in September 1978, the project was administered for one year by the New England Foundation for the Arts before being turned over to NASAA in 1979.

The National Standard addressed the development of standardized terms, definitions, fields, codes and reporting requirements for mailing lists, grants management and arts resource directory systems. The project aimed to ensure compatibility, improve information management, and facilitate the exchange and analysis of comparable arts data on a national basis.

The need for the National Standard arose from the recognition (through the Urice study) that arts agencies across the United States were independently developing their own information systems, thereby struggling with incompatible systems that hindered their ability to manage data effectively and share information with other agencies. This fragmentation made it difficult to analyze and use information on a national scale—a function that grew increasingly necessary for effective arts advocacy, funding and program development. The National Standard aimed to address this issue by providing a unified set of terms, definitions and reporting requirements for mailing lists, grants management and arts resource directories, thus facilitating meaningful analysis and use of data about public arts activities nationwide. By creating a standardized system, NISP aimed to improve the accuracy, efficiency and compatibility of information systems within the arts sector, ultimately enhancing the ability of arts agencies to serve their communities and fulfill their missions.

Key moments in the formation of the National Standard included the establishment of the NISP Policy Committee and the NISP Working Group, which were responsible for overseeing development and implementation of the Standard. The project gained momentum in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with significant involvement from various stakeholders, including state arts agencies and regional arts organizations, consultants, and technical experts. Notable contributors included Mary Van Someren Cok, Henry A. Bromelkamp, Ellen Thurston and Thomas Wolf.

The 1984 National Standard Revision

The first formal revision of the National Standard took place in 1984, as part of an ongoing process to "determine how the National Standard for Arts Information Exchange can be maintained and adjusted to better inform state, jurisdictional and national arts policy discussions and provide comparative information to users."

The National Standard Working Group was established to include representatives from the states and regions, the NEA, and NASAA. Together, members of the working group:

- considered what refinements to the National Standard were needed to address important policy, research and operational issues;
- provided the field with an opportunity to review and comment on proposed changes;
- sought consensus on ways that National Standard revisions could meet the needs of states, regions, the NEA and NASAA;
- recommended National Standard changes for approval to the NASAA board of directors and NEA senior staff; and
- provided implementation suggestions to NASAA and the NEA.

The working group acknowledged the challenges of revising a system that was just beginning to be implemented. As stated in its report:

There were issues of what were the guidelines for change; issues of how to reach consensus on a revision; issues of keeping old data or not and for how long; issues of state arts agency needs and national data needs; and fears of the impact of presenting change to a system that was just now really in place.

They also acknowledged that "any changes—however minimal—which affect field names, definitions, and code categories, will destroy the compatibility of past and future databases, making longitudinal studies which utilize changed components and more than one Standard version very difficult or impossible to conduct."

As part of the first revision, NASAA—in charge of the National Standard since 1979— established that any future revision would not require agencies to adjust or revise data each time a revision is made. Such changes would be unrealistic and therefore not required. Instead, the agencies that desired to make changes "could do so independently of and in addition to the revision implementation activities set forth" in the implementation manual.

The original National Standard had three basic modules: a constituent list and mailing list system, a grants management system, and a constituent activity system. The 1984 revision focused on changes and additions to what are now basic parts of the Standard—the inclusion of Status, Institution, Discipline and Content codes. There were also language changes to several field descriptions to help clarify the meaning of those fields to aid in their application. For example:

existing (ALL IN ORDER, page 115)

16 Arts Council/Agency - an arts organization (sometimes funded by public funds or sanctioned by some branch of government) which provides funding, arts administrative and/or programming services for its members/constituents within a specific geographic locale (e.g., county, state, community)

revision

16 Arts Council/Agency - an organization whose primary purpose is to stimulate and promote the arts and increase access for the public through services, programs, and/or funding, within a specific geographic area (e.g., county, state, local)

Finally—as would be seen in virtually every revision process—there were changes and additions to the list of artistic disciplines. Often there would be additions to establish or broaden the list of subdisciplines, such as here in Architecture/Design:

<u>existing (ALL IN ORDER, page 117)</u>	<u>revision</u>
06 Architecture/Design - include fields of architecture; landscape architecture; urban design, city and regional planning; interior, industrial, fashion, and other recognized design professions	06 Design Arts A architecture* B fashion* C graphic* D industrial* E interior* F landscape architecture* G urban/metropolitan*

Access the [Report on the 1984 Revision Process and Implementation Timetable](#).

It is worth noting that this first revision also established clear advisories for agencies on the implementation of these revisions. There was a Revision Implementation Day (July 1, 1984), with instructions on how the new version of the Standard would impact federal reporting.

The 2002 National Standard Revision

The 2002 National Standard revision, issued in April 2001, was the culmination of a highly inclusive process initiated in December 1999. It began with the establishment of a revisions task force—the National Standard Working Group—which included representatives from state arts agencies, regional arts organizations, NASAA and the NEA. The group involved participants with varying perspectives, including those of program level staff, grants office staff, executive directors, deputy directors, council chairs and research staff.

Agencies large and small (both in terms of staff size and budget size) were represented, as was every geographic region of the country.

The 16-month process produced the [National Standard Revisions Technical Implementation Manual, 2000-2003 Revisions Cycle](#), which outlined several required changes to the National Standard for Arts Information Exchange. Here are a few examples:

- **Individuals Benefiting:** The definition was revised to include only those directly involved in the funded activity, such as artists, participants or audience members. The revised standard encouraged agencies to avoid inflated numbers and double-counting.
- **Folk Arts and Media Arts:** Category 12, Folk Arts, was renamed Folklife/Traditional Arts, with new subcodes (12A-12D) designed to expand the definition of folk and traditional art forms. In addition, a new subcode (09D) was added to category 09, Media Arts, for Technology/Experimental.
- **Activity Type Codes:** New codes for Web Site/Internet Development (35) and Broadcasting (36) were added. Broadcasting is removed from the definition of Activity Type 24.

- **Project Descriptors:** A new field was introduced to mark significant portions of a grant's resources/activities, including Accessibility, International, Presenting/Touring, Technology and Youth at Risk.
- **Grantee Race/Ethnicity:** The existing codes M and G were eliminated. New instructions and codes were provided, allowing multiple selections for individuals and a single predominant group code for organizations.
- **Project Race/Ethnicity:** The definition was broadened to include projects intended to involve or represent the cultural traditions of a particular group or deliver services to a designated population.

These changes aimed to improve data accuracy, consistency and relevance to current programmatic trends and information needs.

The 2014 National Standard Revision

The 2014 National Standard Revision Working Group was established in 2010. It was made up of 14 individuals from state arts agencies (SAAs), regional arts organizations (RAOs) and the NEA, and was managed by NASAA. Over about a three-year period, it discussed and proposed revisions based on field consultations and working group meetings. A [revisions proposal](#) reflecting the recommendations of the working group was forwarded to and approved by both NEA senior staff and the NASAA board of directors in April 2014.

During the intervening years, the need for reliable data to provide evidence supporting the demand for greater state arts funding had increased. At the same time, the NEA was beginning proactively to seek information to address the impact of its programs. Revisions to the NEA's Final Descriptive Report were being developed for submission to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) around the time the working group began discussing National Standard changes. A joint decision was made by the NEA and NASAA to put the National Standard revisions process on hold until the working group's efforts could take into full consideration the NEA's data collection needs.

From 2011 to 2013, the NEA worked on refining its new reporting requirements and solicited comments from NASAA and the working group as well as from Partnership Agreement grant recipients. The NEA submitted its new requirements to OMB in September and December 2013. OMB approved the requirements, which took effect in the NEA's fiscal year 2015 and SAAs' FY2016.

The working group then reconvened in January 2014 to conclude its work on revising the Standard.

The 2014 revisions to the National Standard for Arts Information Exchange included several key changes:

1. Grantee Data

- a. DUNS Number: Added as a necessary field for grantees, except individuals
- b. FEIN Status: Changed from optional to necessary

- c. Storytelling: Added as a subcode under Theater
- d. Application Number: Updated definition and status to necessary

2. Project Data

- a. Artists Participating: Renamed to Artists Directly Involved
- b. Project Descriptors: Retired due to infrequent use and reporting burden

3. Beneficiary Data

- a. Individuals and Youth Benefiting: Renamed and redefined to focus on "in person" arts experiences
- b. Populations Benefited by Race: Added to track racial/ethnic characteristics of beneficiaries
- c. Project Race and Grantee Race: Retired in favor of the new Populations Benefited by Race field
- d. Populations Benefited by Distinct Groups: Added to track specific underserved groups

4. Activity Location

- a. Geographic Data Module: Added to capture detailed activity locations, which are venue addresses beyond the applicant address. Every member of the working group understood and related to the additional burden that this collection may entail, but also saw the long-term value of more precise geographic data for the purposes of research.

5. Additional Notes on NEA Requirements

Several NEA-specific fields and codes were not included in the Standard due to their unique or burdensome nature. For example:

- a. NEA Primary Strategic Outcome is unique to the federal agency's needs.
- b. Primary Beneficiaries by Age categories were seen as too specific to be reasonably reported by grantees.
- c. The number of days on which an activity took place were deemed of limited utility and would impose an additional data collection burden.

Congressional District was not removed from the Standard (Grants Management System field 10), even though it no longer became an NEA reporting requirement.

6. Implementation Notes

- a. Changes will take effect with NEA FY2015/SAA and RAO FY2016 reporting requirements.
- b. NASAA will provide guidance and materials to assist with implementation, especially for complex changes like Activity Location and tracking virtual/media engagement.

7. Future Recommendations

Future working groups should consider tracking employment data, refining project descriptors and activity types, and conducting a thorough inspection of discipline codes.

These changes aimed to improve data collection, align with NEA requirements, and enhance the accuracy and utility of the information gathered by public arts agencies.

What Have We Learned from Over Four Decades of Using the National Standard?

There is value in the standardized collection of data.

The overarching goal of the National Standard was "to arrive at national compatibility in both the organization and labeling of information used by public arts agencies." Prior to the implementation of the Standard, arts administrators created their own independent data gathering systems. According to John Urice in his 1978 report, such systems were "wasteful and redundant" and "the overall information needs of a region or the country were no closer to being met."

It's clear that the standardization of data among the federal and state public arts agencies and regional arts organizations has been valuable. Developing and promoting a system that allows for the gathering of the same information by all, with each data field part of a "national system of working definitions" helped to reduce conflicts and confusion among constituents and data gatherers. Without a national standardization movement, we would not have been able to speak with a single voice on the impact of our decades-long work in support of the arts.

Decisions about which data should be gathered and how it is gathered should engage members of the grant-making community.

During each of the significant National Standard review periods, NASAA helped to assemble a working group broadly representative of federal, state and regional arts entities. There were participants from agency leadership as well as programmatic and grants officers. Working group members could discuss issues based on their personal experience working with constituents and the data they provided. The state arts agencies and regional arts organizations were kept informed throughout the review process, and their feedback before, during and at the conclusion of the review was considered by working group members and the NASAA board. Proposed changes were reviewed by NEA leadership and the appropriate NASAA committees and were finally approved by the NASAA board. An implementation document was produced designed to help SAAs and RAOs adopt the changes on a universally agreed-upon schedule.

The high degree of engagement with the field helped to lessen any conflicts or disagreements regarding what were usually changes that were difficult to implement. Without this depth of engagement, some participants might have been tempted to drop out of the system, which would have ruined the field's ability to gather strong and viable information on a national basis.

Information is more comprehensive (and useful) if its collection is part of a compulsory process.

The best data comes when the broadest and most diverse group of arts entities is required/compelled to contribute. IRS Form 990s are widely recognized as a rich source of information. Every nonprofit must submit an annual 990. Likewise, arts researchers have benefitted from being able to see data from everyone who has received a grant from a public funder. This had been possible only through the requirement that grantees submit National Standard information as part of the final report they submit after the conclusion of their grant-funded project or period.

Agreement on the details of data gathering are hampered if priorities differ among the federal, state and regional partners.

In my interview with former NEA State and Regional Programs Director Ed Dickey and former NEA State and Regional Partnerships Specialist Andi Mathis, we discussed the challenges of aligning grant processes at the state and federal levels, particularly the need for timely revisions to forms, guidelines and systems. The NEA's priorities were driven by directives from the federal Office of Management and Budget as well as internal schedules and time lines. The state arts agencies and regional arts organizations—the principal data gatherers—maintained an array of grant-making schedules and were also hampered by the need to gather information from grant recipients at the end of their project periods. Sometimes this didn't happen quickly enough to satisfy the needs of the NEA for a complete picture of grant-making impact from a recent fiscal year.

In addition, the NEA and SAAs/RAOs sometimes differed in their perceptions of what would pose burdensome or impractical data requirements. For example, 2014 working group members ultimately asserted that the NEA Primary Strategic Outcome field was too specific to the federal agency's needs. Similarly, members said the data for the Primary Beneficiaries by Age categories could not reasonably be reported by grantees. They also found limited utility (compared with the cost) in collecting and reporting the number of days for which a grant project activity occurred. On the other hand, the group supported the continued collection of congressional districts, even though the NEA was no longer making it a reporting requirement.

The National Standard is not an ideal financial data-gathering tool.

The original National Information Systems Project, as described in the publication *All in Order*, had a comprehensive list of financial data points to gather. They included Previous, Current and Next Year Income and Expenditures; Project Financial Data broken down by subcategories; Revenue Source information; Grant-Specific Financial Data; and Actual Financial Data for all expense and revenue categories.

Early in the establishment of the National Standard, state and regional arts entities voiced concern with potential issues of compliance: being required to gather a high volume of data from their grant recipients, with no clear indications on how that information might be used. SAAs and RAOs often would gather a variety of financial information specific to grant activities on their own, but it was

not part of the Standard. By the time of the 1984 revision, the following financial fields were all that were required for collection through the National Standard and for transmission to the NEA:

Amount Spent, Grant Amount Spent, Expenses, Income, In-Kind, Basic State Grant Share, Other NEA, SAA Share, Other Share

The National Standard can, at its best, provide a snapshot of a small subset of public art grant recipients. For more, you must look to other research sources.

As NASAA Chief Program and Planning Officer Kelly Barsdate said in our interview, "The National Standard was not intended to be a methodology for outreach but a container for information about individuals or organizations." A "methodology for outreach" refers to a structured plan or process for initiating contact and building relationships with a targeted audience. The National Standard was never intended to be more than a set of standardized definitions designed to help keep everyone on the same page in collecting, sharing and analyzing data from grant recipients in order to speak, in the broadest way, about the impact of these grants. Barsdate continued, "the National Standard was born to help the field describe itself, focusing on the nature of arts activities and entities rather than financial aspects." Accordingly, unlike other systems that collect generic information or focus on financial elements, the National Standard was the only taxonomy driven by the field's nature.

Appendix: Links for Further Information

[*All in Order: Information Systems for the Arts*](#), by Mary Van Someren Cok. Published by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (1981)

[1984 National Standard Implementation Guide](#)

[1991 National Standard Implementation Guide](#)

[1994 National Standard Implementation Guide](#)

[2001 National Standard Implementation Guide](#)

[National Standard Reference Guide](#)

[National Standard Revisions Change Log](#)