

*State Arts Agency Executive Directors:
The First Decade*
The Creation of an Arts Constituency

Oral History Report #4

Corrinn Conard
Arts Policy and Administration at
The Ohio State University
conard.10@osu.edu



THE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF ART EDUCATION
ARTS POLICY & ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM

Occasional paper

***State Arts Agency Executive Directors:
The First Decade***
The Creation of an Arts Constituency

Oral History Report #4

Corrinn Conard
Arts Policy and Administration at
The Ohio State University
conard.10@osu.edu

An Oral History Project based on Interviews with Executive Directors of State Arts Agencies
Interviews conducted by Susan Neumann-Martinsen and Maryo Ewell.

Project Co-Directors

Wayne P. Lawson, Ph.D., Director Emeritus of the Ohio Arts Council
Margaret J. Wyszomirski, Ph.D., Director, Graduate Program in Arts Policy &
Administration, The Ohio State University

Project Sponsors

Ohio Arts Foundation
Ohio Arts Council
The Graduate Program in Arts Policy and Administration at the Ohio State University
Arts Midwest
South Dakotans for the Arts

For additional copies of this paper, information on other reports in the SAA Oral History Project
can be found as part of the Occasional Papers series at the website for the Arts Policy &
Administration Program at the Ohio State University or the Ohio Arts Council.

Department of Art Education
The Ohio State University
258 Hopkins Hall
128 North Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210-1363

Phone: (614) 292-5356
Website: <http://arted.osu.edu>

Ohio Arts Council
727 E. Main Street
Columbus, OH 43205-1796

Phone: (614) 466-2613
Website: www.oac.state.oh.us/

State Arts Agency Executive Directors: The First Decade
The Creation of an Arts Constituency
Oral History Report #4

Corrinn Conard
Arts Policy and Administration at the Ohio State University
conard.10@osu.edu

Before the NEA was founded and State Arts Agencies (SAAs) were developed, both the variety of and access to the arts were quite limited. The ingredients of a strong and unified arts constituency existed, for the most part, as scattered “High Arts” institutions (museums, symphonies and theatre companies), small, unorganized community groups and passionate individual patrons and artists. Though these art enthusiasts existed, they were not yet unified as an arts constituency. Unification however seemed desired and inevitable. As one SAA Executive Director recalls, “it just seemed that the time for public support for the arts had come – it seemed that the time was right” (Bill Jamison, Oklahoma, 1975 - 1977). It was a primary goal of the SAA Directors to interweave existing organizations, strengthen them in influence and number and ultimately create a unified arts constituency within their states.

In order to establish a strong arts constituency, State Arts Agencies’ Executive Directors appear to have focused on a series of steps including **exposure, appreciation and professional organization**. Their main targets for these steps were **artists and arts organizations, the general public, and political players**.

First, Executive Directors worked to spread the arts of the larger cities out into the rural communities of their states. They wanted all citizens to have access to artistic opportunities and to experience the values affiliated with the arts. In doing so, Executive Directors hoped to plant the seeds for art and constituency growth throughout their states. State Arts Agencies also needed to reveal their new existence to artists and arts institutions and educate them on the structure of their parent association, the National Endowment for the Arts. Essentially, they needed to advertise their cause to their possible clients. Finally, SAA Executive Directors wanted to educate the political players of their states on the relevance of both the established “high arts” that existed as well as to the community arts that lived quietly in the shadows.

In conjunction with exposure, SAA Executive Directors needed to build up their constituents’ appreciation for the arts. They worked to establish an equality between local community arts and the “High Arts”. They familiarized political players with the individual artists and the art institutions within their states. They helped artists understand and appreciate the intricate workings of public funding and the bureaucracy. Finally, they increased the general public’s appreciation for the existence and importance of the arts in their communities. Ultimately, by increasing appreciation, the SAAs wanted citizens to understand the importance of artistic opportunity, the relevance of building a strong arts

constituency and critical nature of art's public funding.

After exposure and appreciation were established, SAA Executive Directors focused on the professionalization of the arts. Executive Directors knew that if they did not help solidify the arts through the creation of Local Arts Agencies, rural arts institutions and other community arts organizations, any effects of the SAA and the NEA would be ephemeral.

Three main target groups of the SAA Executive Directors were; **artists and arts organizations, the general public, and political players.** These three groups heavily relied upon each other for their strength and endurance as a unified arts constituency. Together, they created a kind of support triangle for the arts that had to be continuously balanced and nurtured. Maintaining this balance was one of the ultimate duties of the SAA Executive Directors. Without attention to each one of these three elements, arts constituency would have suffered. As one Executive Director explained, "...give [artists] all the money in the world and if you don't have an audience and continued support in the future then you don't have your artist either" (John G. Coe, Wyoming, 1992 - 2003).

From the reflective words of several original State Arts Agency Executive Directors, one can begin to envision the augmentation of this structure, this arts constituency triangle. Today, we can look back on these young years and in order to assess current situations, understand contemporary goals, revel in accomplishments and to grapple with all that has yet to be realized.

The General Public and the Arts Constituency

Building a strong arts constituency for the first State Arts Agencies required the satisfaction and participation of their states' general public. According to several SAA Executive Directors, there "was [an] enormous appetite for the arts" within the general public (Peter Hero, Oregon, 1975 - 1986). Despite this appetite however, building a unified constituency still required strong movements from Executive Directors both laterally and vertically, spreading the arts out as well as building them up.

SAA's seemed, first and foremost, focused on the geographical spread of the established arts from larger cities into the rural nooks and crannies of their states. In these areas, most Executive Directors, city dwellers and the NEA considered art to be scarce and present only in the form of common "crafts" which were not considered relevant arts. Executive Directors perceived themselves as bringing the art world to the artistically underprivileged populations of their state. As one director put it, they were "missionaries" of the arts. In retrospect, one Executive Director recalls the importance of also exposing the "cultured" communities to the artistic richness that existed outside of the major cities. He stated that "...it was obvious that so much of the vibrancy of American culture was not at the power centers but at the margins, and it seemed to be as important to help people of privilege discover the many ways they had been deprived of cultural opportunities...as it was essential that, in a democracy, cultural policy deal clearly with a systemic tendency to relegate the have-nots to class-based lower cultural status" (Anthony S. Keller, Connecticut, 1966 - 1981).

In conjunction with exposure, Executive Directors needed to exhort the relevance of the arts, of the NEA, of the SAA's and of public funding for the arts. SAA Executive Directors seemed to have wanted to create a soft frenzy for the arts and for the NEA which would in turn motivate the general public to build art support systems that would mature arts constituency, arts advocacy and cultural growth. The agencies also worked to expand their own awareness of their citizens. Executive Directors understood the need to relate to their constituents and to learn what it was the general public hungered for and demanded from the arts. They wanted to be cognizant of the expectations of potential audiences and patrons in order to better serve and nurture them.

Exposure

“Well, certain communities had non [local arts agencies] and I enjoyed going out to smaller towns like Urbana and Salon, and smaller cities, Ashtabula along the lake...places that stood in shadow of a Cleveland Orchestra or the Dayton Ballet Company...and being able to go in and saying, ‘What resources do you have? How can we help you?’”

Donald R. Streibig, Ohio (1967 - 1972)

“I had to provide delivery systems for the arts to the underserved areas...They had nothing...We were incredible idealists and, as I said before, missionaries. I think that’s the best word. We were bringing the gospel of art to people who just didn’t have access.”

Wesley O. Brustad, South Carolina (1971 - 1974)

“The big idea was insistently making events of the arts available for audiences throughout the state no matter how small the community might be...”

John B. Hightower, New York (1963 - 1970)

“...but one thing that seemed to me important was to make the arts more generally visible to the largest number of people possible.”

Bernie Lopez, New Mexico (1975 - 1985)

Awareness

“I think what I basically hoped to do was create an awareness of the need for art and the need to support art in our state. From that it grew into helping to help others meet their dreams, realize their dreams, and that there was support out there and that more things could be happening.”

John G. Coe, Wyoming (1992 - 2003)

“Always the biggest challenge for the arts in any kind of area where public funding is involved is the value to the community of the arts; in proving that, in getting people to understand it... People just don’t think of the arts as important. They think of them as elite. They think of them as a frill and that challenges you throughout and especially in state governments.”

Ann Vermel, Rhode Island (1971 - 1976)

“My biggest job and my biggest goal and my biggest idea was to get into the community and see what the people really wanted.”

John Jowers, Virgin Islands (1969 - 1985)

“There were people in town, a lot of these people thought of the arts in kind of an elitist way, too, but I think once they got into it, they thought that there was a lot more to it than they realized.”

Bob Moon, Kansas (1971 - 1973)

Professionalization

“We had to convince the...community, the establishment, that there was a need for an arts council.”

Donald R. Streibig, Ohio (1967 - 1972)

“I really believed in the local dissemination of the arts through community arts councils. That was my whole reason for being, really.”

Bob Moon, Kansas (1971 - 1973)

“Once we’d established an appetite it was up to the communities to develop their own arts programs.”

Leonard Pas, Illinois (1965 - 1974)

Artists / Arts Organizations and the Arts Constituency

The overall reaction from individual artists and arts organizations towards the efforts of the SAA Executive Directors appears to have been a positive one. The scattered and sporadic art world seemed to have been ready and waiting for such organization, unification and support. Many Executive Directors simply wanted “to create a healthy, productive climate for artists” and felt that “if artists were well served, the public would be well served” (Terry Melton, Oregon, 1970 - 1975). However, the SAA Executive Directors knew that this ideal was not so simple. As explained earlier, SAA Executive Directors established and followed a series of steps which included exposure, appreciation and professional organization.

With the artists and arts organizations, SAA Executive Directors first and foremost needed their assistance in spreading the established arts and the “high” culture to the rural communities of their states where they felt the arts were lacking. They wanted to

increase art appreciation and stimulate the organization of new arts institutions and agencies.

Executive Directors also needed to unite the scattered artists and arts organizations which existed throughout their states. They especially focused on merging the established, well supported “High Arts” and the lesser known, under-respected community arts. They aspired to narrow the gap between these constituents through touring groups, partnerships and funding emphasis.

Beyond exposure, building appreciation and uniting forces, SAA Executive Directors encouraged the professionalization of individuals and informal organizations. Professionalization was particularly important so that a strong constituency could be built and the services of the NEA could be maintained efficiently. SAA Executive Directors knew that the professionalization of loosely organized artists would result in unification among communities, connections with public agencies and an overall solidification of the arts throughout the country.

Spreading the Arts (Exposure)

“...I was most interested in...community development...secondly, I was interested in assisting artists to make a living as artists in some way, knowing our society didn’t put a high value on that...”

Leonard Pas, Illinois (1965 - 1974)

“My big idea was to support artists and to help them improve and to build audience through outreach of the arts so I wanted to build audience and make people who are practicing the arts, give them some capacity building, strengthen their capabilities where they were less than excellent.”

Nash Cox, Kentucky (1974-1985)

“We didn’t realize it; we thought they would be very much against it but they were very, very excited about going out into these rural communities and playing everything from chamber orchestras to string trios to trombone ensembles to vocal ensembles. We just sent them all around the state.”

Norman Lawrence Patrick Fagan, West Virginia (1966 - 1970)

My hope...besides keeping it alive, was to heighten the awareness of the arts in their diversity and in their creators, the artists themselves, which at one point I referred to as “an endangered species.”

Sophie Chandler Consagra, Delaware (1972 - 1977)

“...the challenge was to work with...major institutions and show them that they had a responsibility to the rest of the community...”

Norman Lawrence Patrick Fagan, West Virginia (1966 - 1970)

“One of the things we did was, we looked upon the major institutions as partners, and not as grantees... to represent a statewide constituency by going out with our partners, be it Chautauquaua or the Denver Symphony or the Denver Art Museum taking different exhibits to different towns throughout the state ...”

Robert Sheets, Colorado (1967 - 1980)

Closing the Gaps (Appreciation)

“For me, and, as I recall, for many of my colleagues in the beginning, maintaining a healthy balance between established and emerging constituencies was one of our greatest challenges. The pressure from both sides was sometimes very strong, and we were often reminded that it was not really in our job specs to be social engineers, nor was it in our job specs to be protectors of the status quo... We considered our involvement in urban neighborhood arts programs and community projects in rural areas of the same validity as our support of the state’s more established and visible cultural activities and organizations.”

Anthony S. Keller, Connecticut (1966 - 1981)

“The central theme...was to get everybody organized. It didn’t seem necessary to start new organizations around the state. We weren’t in a position to do that. What we had to do was get the organizations that already existed talking to each other and working together.”

Arthur Williams, Vermont (1967 - 1969; 1974 - 1975; 1985 - 1986)

“And for the major organizations we considered major funding – so we would fund in the \$30-40,000 range. And other people could apply for as much as they wanted, and they might or might not get it, but the majors were treated as major organizations, with major funding.”

Bernie Lopez, New Mexico (1975 - 1985)

“The NEA was not created to do folk arts programs, expansion arts programs and those other broad based socially related programs. Rather it was created to serve the arts institutions of the nation which existed at the time.”

Alden C. Wilson, Maine (1974 - Present)

“And the other thing, the endless squabbling between big and little organizations – this whole debate about populism, quality, all this thing – the big guys saying “We’re the flagships” and the little guys saying “We’re overlooked” – it was so hard to get people on the same page.”

Peter Hero, Oregon (1975 - 1986)

“We had to persuade them that united we stand; we can get more, we can make a better play if we all stick together instead of squabbling over, at that time, minimal monies that were available.”

Donald R. Streibig, Ohio (1967 - 1972)

Building Up (Professionalization)

“So the whole point off my orientation grew to be getting the community-based organizations, and arts organizations ready to handle the money that would be available.”

Roy Helms, Alaska (1972 - 1977)

“My big idea was that I needed to upgrade professionalism and standards especially in the performing arts in the state because we had no professional companies of any kind.”

Wesley O. Brustad, South Carolina (1971 - 1974)

“I did a lot of traveling, building local arts councils, getting them started, giving them an idea of how to organize, how to become stable. There were not experienced people in this area...you had to teach, to nurture, to help them develop a sense of business.”

Jack Olds, Iowa (1967 - 1979)

“I think it was only natural that we had to mature to the point where we had strong organizations and strong community development and then we could begin to work more closely with encouraging the individual artists.”

Nash Cox, Kentucky (1974 - 1985)

Political Players and the Arts Constituency

An essential element to the building of strong and enduring arts constituencies was the relationship established with the involved political players of the time. Though not as

romantic as some of the other arts constituents, the political player's interacted with SAA Executive Directors in dynamic and intriguing ways. As with other constituency partners, SAA Executive Directors had to focus often on the actions of exposure and appreciation while facing many challenges of resistance and preconceived notions. Three roles of the SAA Executive Directors in relation to political players were interpreter, advocate and artist.

The first Executive Directors of States Arts Agencies were often balancing on a thin rope that separated the artists from the bureaucrats. Bureaucrats had to understand the needs and the nature of artists and their organizations. Likewise, artists had to learn to accept the methodologies and the motives of bureaucracy. Often, it was the SAA Executive Director who lay in the middle forced to act as translator for these two groups of imperative, yet often contrasting constituents.

SAA Executive Directors also faced challenges with regards to public funding concentration and often had to advocate for the smaller, community arts organizations. Many political players seemed to encourage the funding of larger established institutions, traditional styles and mediums, the "High Arts". As one Executive Director explains, *"Many (not just those with vested interests) urged us to leave the structure alone and funnel tax dollars into the existing organizations with reliable management, and do everything possible to improve connections between those organizations and the evolving audiences which had been deprived of cultural opportunities in the past..."* (Anthony S. Keller, Connecticut, 1966 - 1981). Often contradictory to this was a frequent inclination of the SAA Executive Directors to promote the local, community arts. Together, these two tendencies almost unintentionally created morphed focus on the unification and partnership between these two realms of art.

Many of the original SAA Executive Directors were artistic themselves, they could easily relate to their constituents who were artists and there seemed to exist a stronger sentimentality towards these constituents as well as the lesser known arts organizations. However, Executive Directors were quite aware that a strong arts constituency would not grow sturdy and complete without a kind of support triangle which included all three essential elements; the artist, the audience, and the political player. In their interviews, Executive Directors indeed praised personal involvement in the arts. However, when asked how new Executive Directors should be prepared for their journeys, many recommended a solid knowledge of politics.

Executive Director as Interpreter

"...but we also knew that government and the arts did not always work particularly well because of the arts' insistency on reinventing themselves and frequently going through shock waves or shocking waves to unsettle the status quo. There was very careful balancing act that we were constantly aware of."

John B. Hightower, New York (1963 - 1970)

“In general, I tried to act as sort of the shock absorber between the arts community and the politics.”

John K. Urice, Florida (1976 - 1978)

Director as Advocate

“The bigger issue though was trying to get money from the KS legislature. That whole song and dance...They just didn’t understand. They were conservative farmers. The arts to them was the symphony, dressed up in coat and tails. We had to make a case and enroll them that the arts could happen in their own community, and that their community would be better for it.”

Bob Moon, Kansas (1971 - 1973)

“Of course here was the perception that the function of the NEA was to fund a significant portion of the budgets of “the best arts organizations in the US.” And I, as a state that was working from the community up, felt that my avenues were limited.”

Jonathan Katz, Kansas (1973 - 1976)

“I came imbued with ideas about indigenous arts at the community level – that was not the vision that the 15 commissioners shared. Their idea was “we will bring the arts – Quality Professional Arts – to the Little People...We’ve got musicians playing 29th century stuff, opera companies that are furthering a dead art form, museums that are not doing contemporary work or if they are, it’s so esoteric that people can’t connect. They are destroying things. They need to make the arts alive in America!”

Dr. Michael Warlum, Indiana (1969 - 1972)

Executive Director as Artist

“At the start there were a lot of artists and others whose careers up to that point were close to the field on a direct, experiential basis. After awhile the same people matured into artist-bureaucrats, more efficient and often more effective, but, in some cases, less heartfelt.”

Anthony S. Keller, Connecticut (1966 - 1981)

“I think this is going to sound old fashion and idealistic but I still think that the basic competency is a deep and even intuitive or based on practice understanding of the arts themselves and the creative impulse. I think without that basic love or direct experience whether you’ve come out of it or you’re an appreciator like I am, then you might as well go administer something else and earn some more money because it doesn’t make sense otherwise.”

Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, Vermont (1975 - 1983)

“I still believe that one of the major reasons for the success of the arts in those early days of the arts councils was the fact that most of the directors came from an artistic discipline.”

Norman Lawrence Patrick Fagan, West Virginia (1966 - 1970)

“I’d been in the business 8 years before I even heard the term “arts administration” - there wasn’t such a thing - so we were all actors, and players, and painters and so forth that began to run these agencies. We felt that the guidelines should reflect an encouragement to be of help to artists. And again, we felt that if they were well-served then the public would be well-served.”

Terry Melton, Oregon (1970 - 1975)

“I think the main thing though is that has changed mightily as I look at this world is that everybody we knew including the people at the Arts Endowment at that time were retooled artists of one kind or another. They did not come from business worlds and things like that. I think that’s changed and I think that’s a damn shame. If I had to advise arts agencies today, I’d say, “For god’s sake, get yourself a bunch of artists of various kinds to run these things.” They may be a little wacky but, if they can retool into arts administrators, you are lot better of than having Arts Administrators with two capital “A’s.”

Donald Mintz, Maryland (1969 - 1972)

“And they were all artists or had been, had a personal experience and career in the arts. That was very important, extremely important in many ways. One, they understood what art was about, they appreciated good stuff, quality, serious stuff; they were able to talk to artists with credibility.”

Bernie Lopez, New Mexico (1975 - 1985)