

TOUGH TIMES: ADVOCACY STRATEGIES IN AN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

When economic indicators are down, what can arts advocates do to minimize the financial harm to arts programs? How can arts advocates maximize the possibilities for public arts funding during a difficult economic period?

Even during difficult economic times, elected officials support the arts when they understand the tangible benefits that accrue to communities through the arts. Advocacy can make the difference. Politicians perceive the arts as a valuable asset when they hear a message with relevance to them and to their constituents.

In times of diminished state revenues and tight budgets, state arts agencies do best to develop a flexible and creative response to a state's fiscal constraints, aligning their budget priorities with the political realities. We have to explain how the arts address a range of civic concerns. Government spending on the arts at the federal, state and local levels fares best, in any economic climate, when legislators understand how the arts can help them advance their own policy agendas.

In the face of adversity, advocacy succeeds when coalitions form. State arts agencies can provide strong leadership and valuable support to advocacy by helping to make the case for the benefit of public funding of the arts. The tools advocates need – data showing how public funds are used – are available from state arts agencies to explain how tax dollars dedicated to the arts serve the public.

establish the arts in public policy

Make the arts a part of your state's economic recovery plan. Show how public funding for the arts is a timely investment for a state facing tough economic conditions. Remind your elected officials that the arts generate jobs, tax revenue and consumer spending.

Link public arts funding to priority areas in public policy in education, social concerns, health care, and economic and commercial development. It is always important to give a larger dimension to your advocacy for the arts by broadening the discussion to embrace other issues.

Illustrate the ways your constituents contribute to economic productivity, educational success and community well-being. A small investment in the arts can help build the economic strength of a community by promoting tourism, revitalizing the core commercial district and attracting businesses to expand local job opportunities.



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Advocates can draw on a wealth of research demonstrating the arts' role in improving student learning and preparing young people for the work force, in developing America's creative industries, and in offering positive alternatives to troubled youth.

The Arts and Economic Development

- Cultural development plays a central role in urban revitalization and community renewal strategies.
- The arts attract businesses, visitors and new residents, contributing to increased tax revenues.
- Cultural offerings enhance the market appeal of an area. In the new economy, business success depends on an ability to recruit skilled knowledge workers. The arts and cultural offerings of a region are often considered by companies and workers when deciding where to relocate.
- The arts attract tourism dollars. Public support of cultural tourism plays a critical role in community revitalization as well as the expansion of tourism — one of the fastest-growing economic markets in the country today.

The **Florida Arts Council** focuses advocacy strategy on the economy and jobs in Florida, aligning arts spending with policies of concern to Florida legislators. Arts advocates in Florida promote the central role of the arts and cultural resources as part of the solution in economic development, cultural tourism, job development and business location.

The Arts and Education

- Educational research shows that children who study the arts demonstrate stronger overall academic performance. With education a top public policy priority, the role of the arts in learning is of increasing interest to parents, educators, legislators, civic leaders and business owners.
- Arts programs improve students' self-confidence, build communication and problem-solving skills in children and teens, and prepare young people to be the resourceful and creative problem solvers that employers seek for today's work force.
- The arts develop the kinds of innovative minds and creative skills drawn upon by the entertainment, advertising, design, technical, scientific and other industries that enable businesses to compete successfully in the 21st century workplace.

The Arts and Health Care

- The arts offer an innovative solution for addressing the rising costs in Medicare and health care insurance for an aging population. Research in recent years has found that engagement in the arts among older people supports physical, mental and emotional well-being and eases some symptoms of illness, including dementia.
- Extensive study on creativity and aging conducted at the George Washington University Center on Aging, Health & Humanities found that those involved in the arts reported better overall physical health and fewer doctor visits than those not involved in the arts. They also reported fewer falls, better scores on depression and loneliness scales, reduced use of medications, and overall reduction in the factors that drive the need for long-term care.

The message for advocates is clear: Public arts funding serves a public purpose. Understand what matters most to your elected officials and put the arts in the middle of it. The arts give policymakers the tools for solving problems in creative and cost-effective ways. When the arts connect to other public policy issues, especially in times of economic stress, the arts win as a matter of public policy.

In proposing a budget designed to take per capita funding from \$0.22 to \$1.00, the **Texas Commission on the Arts** stresses the role of the arts in fostering a positive business climate and equipping a creative work force. With the creation of a new grant category called Arts Respond, the arts commission plans to focus support for projects that specifically reflect the state's priorities for responding to critical issues identified by the governor and the legislature in education, health care and human services, economic development, juvenile delinquency prevention, natural resources and activities in rural areas.

demonstrate service impact and economic impact

In times of economic distress, show how public arts funding serves the public. If you can accurately demonstrate that a community's needs are hurt by funding cuts to arts programs, then shape your case to emphasize how urgently funding is now needed. Your political champions will need to know how economic troubles are hurting the local beneficiaries of your support. Emphasize the community services and programs provided by the arts organizations in your state. For example, highlight the value of public funding support for reduced or free admissions to museums and arts performances offered to students, young people and other community groups.

The **Montana Arts Council** encourages its grantees to invite legislators to visit their programs, to see more of the public service an arts organization offers beyond its public performances. For example, legislators are asked to attend an artist's workshop offered in a school to see an arts program at work. Artists and schoolchildren have the opportunity to talk to the legislators about the experience and value gained from the arts in education. The classroom teacher has the chance to talk about the value of the arts in the classroom to the teaching offered the students, to show – while explaining – how money from the Montana Arts Council supporting the arts in schools is going to fulfill a state goal of including the arts in public education in the state. The legislators, in turn, are asked by the artists to write their observations on what they have seen and the return garnered by the public investment in the arts. Montana's strategy promotes the cultivation of relationships with legislators and engages elected officials as advocates for the arts services in their communities. The legislators' letters become part of the project's final report to the Montana Arts Council.

The advocate's arsenal includes economic arguments that demonstrate:

- how governmental support for the arts stimulates giving from the private sector,
- how the arts are an exportable commodity that fosters commerce and trade,
- how the arts contribute to consumer spending, and
- how the arts fuel economic growth.

The data gathered from economic impact studies conducted by city, county and state governments have repeatedly been used to show that the economic benefits of the arts demonstrably exceed the investment of public support.

To convince politicians and policymakers that spending on the arts is a good investment, advocates need the kind of hard data presented by an economic impact survey. Remind your policymakers that arts organizations participate in the local economy, providing jobs and purchasing goods and services. Support for the arts at the local level is the most effective message. The advocate armed with the facts and figures about how the arts affect the community makes the best case with legislators.

use your data to document the consequences:

program closings and staff cuts

Measure the consequences of cuts in funding to the operation of arts organizations in your state. When a theatre company is forced to close its doors, workers lose jobs. When an opera company files for bankruptcy, businesses in the community lose a paying customer for goods and services. At a time when politicians are focusing on job creation and retention, support to the arts needs to be part of the policy agenda in ensuring employment in the arts.

In early 2008, after the **Illinois Arts Council** had suffered funding cuts, the Illinois Arts Alliance, to inform its advocacy support for the arts with the legislature, conducted an on-line survey to assess the impact on the state's nonprofit arts sector of the cuts and overall economic problems. As a result of reduced funds, organizations small and large were forced to scale back in the size and ambition of their artistic programs; education and outreach programs were reduced; and staff jobs were threatened with loss. Data showed that budget cuts jeopardized arts education opportunities in schools and limited access to free or reduced cost arts programs for those needing assistance.

In this economic climate, it is more important than ever to have current and reliable data about the financial health of our nation's arts programs so we can make our case to our elected officials about the valuable resources we offer to communities across the country.

In addition to an overall economic downturn bearing negatively on state government revenues, charities are experiencing a significant shortfall in giving. According to a survey of the nonprofit sector released at the end of October 2008, the proportion of charities reporting decreased contributions nearly doubled between 2007 and 2008. The annual report prepared by GuideStar shows that almost half of nonprofits surveyed that rely on end-of-year gifts expected donations to decline during the last quarter of 2008 compared to the last quarter of 2007.¹

demonstrate your organizational efficiency: a sound investment

Be clear about the fiscal benefits of government support for the arts. Help your elected officials understand the unique role that public dollars play in leveraging additional funds, providing equitable access to resources, fostering good business practices and ensuring accountability among your grantee arts organizations.

Show how your agency is a judicious steward of public dollars. Eager to cut costs, elected officials and budget officers are placing ever more emphasis on efficiency and downsizing. Visibly identify the measures you are adopting to conserve resources and streamline systems. Cost-cutting efforts, combined with continuing emphasis on stewardship, can keep your organization in business for the near term and strong for the long run.

work in coalition: advance a collective strategy

Develop collaborative lobbying strategies with other advocacy groups on issues of mutual interest. Promote alliances between arts advocates and non-arts advocacy groups – such as teachers' organizations, travel and tourism groups, historic preservation, organizations serving youth, chambers of commerce and business groups.

The **Pennsylvania Council on the Arts** has taken a creative step further to engage politicians in an advocacy strategy for state arts funding – mobilizing the support of local elected officials familiar with the benefits of public spending on the arts in their own communities. The state arts agency recruited mayors, county commissioners and other local public officials to contact the governor and state legislators with persuasive messages to advocate on behalf of increased funding for the arts in the state budget.

Work with a statewide coalition of arts advocates to organize events locally and on the state level. Promote direct contact with legislators, local officials and community leaders. Recognize the opportunities in your public planning process for building coalitions and broadening your constituency. The result can be a strong, committed statewide network of grass-roots advocates for the arts, combining the clout of the state's arts leaders with arts audiences to lobby for an arts budget that serves everyone.

engage grantees and audiences to communicate your message

Open lines of communication to promote cooperation on advocacy.

Collaborate to eliminate duplication and avoid surprises that can split the arts community. Build a vocal and informed local constituency to support the arts advocacy efforts in your state. Persuade your constituents to rally their members and audiences to advocate for the arts. Help your grantees explain to their grass-roots consumers the importance of public funding for the arts programs that they present and you fund.

Now is a good time to step up your on-line communications efforts. If you're contacting your supporters once a month by email, increase the frequency to twice monthly or weekly, if necessary. Keep the network of advocates informed about current issues in federal and state legislation that affect the arts. Optimize on-line advocacy opportunities on your Web site by making the process as easy as possible for your supporters, including a prominent "Advocacy" button on every page.

With the foundational information essential to persuasive advocacy, state arts agencies serve as the principal case-maker for the benefit of public funding for the arts. Communicate simply and concisely to your grantees and other arts constituents with the information they need to build the case for public arts spending.

note

¹*Seventh Annual GuideStar Nonprofit Survey: Charitable Organizations and the Economy.* http://www.guidestar.org/news/features/2008_survey.pdf (October 2008).