



Despite Some Risks, State Arts Agencies Might Benefit from Closer Relations with Government

State arts agencies (SAAs)—state government organizations that support the arts mostly through grants to artists and nonprofit arts organizations—receive some funding from the federal National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), but most of their funding comes from appropriations from their own state legislatures. Since SAAs were deliberately structured to avoid possible political influence on their grantmaking, elected officials in most states have had little input into SAA decisions. This raises a key question: Should the relationship between state officials and their SAAs be “arm’s length” or “arm in arm”?

In a new study that is part of ongoing work for The Wallace Foundation, RAND researchers seek to answer this question, relying on interviews with current and past SAA staff and board members, NEA staff, arts advocates, past and former SAA grantees, and state legislators, and analyzing data from a number of sources including the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies and the NEA. Researchers identified strategic issues SAA leaders face as they seek to solidify state-level political support and expand public funding for the arts and their agencies. Their findings include the following:

- The SAAs’ “arm’s length” relationships with state government hurt their ability to attract and retain political support. Many state officials did not fully understand what SAAs did and were not persuaded they provided value to residents who are not part of the arts community.
- Case studies of SAAs in Montana and Maine showed how SAA leaders can close the gap between the arts world and the political world without becoming politicized. Other SAAs are now seeking closer relationships with their political supporters to ensure a stronger funding base.
- There are risks associated with lowering the barriers between the arts and politics, the biggest of which is that public support for the arts might be justified entirely in terms of such benefits as economic development and improved education. If judged solely on these grounds, the arts cannot compete with other claims on public money.

The results suggest that given prevailing economic and political trends, the potential rewards of an “arm in arm” approach might outweigh the risks. To build greater support, SAAs could identify how their activities benefit a broad spectrum of state citizens and contribute to state-determined public policy agendas and disseminate that information. If SAAs can work with state political leaders without being dominated by them, Americans could benefit from more stable public funding for the arts and a greater integration of the arts and culture into government planning for the future.

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This fact sheet describes work done within RAND Education documented in *The Arts and State Governments: At Arm's Length or Arm in Arm?* by Julia F. Lowell and Elizabeth Heneghan Ondaatje, MG-359-WF (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG359/>), 2006, 84 pp., \$20, ISBN: 978-0-8330-3867-8.

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