



---

Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: The Arts and State Governments

Book Subtitle: At Arm's Length or Arm in Arm?

Book Author(s): Julia F. Lowell and Elizabeth Heneghan Ondaatje

Published by: RAND Corporation

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg359wf.7>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a RAND Corporation License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.html>.



RAND Corporation is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Arts and State Governments*

JSTOR

## Introduction

---

Most of America's state arts agencies (SAAs) were created to take advantage of federal arts funds that became available at the founding of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965 (Netzer, 1978; Larson, 1983; Mark, 1991).<sup>1,2</sup> The NEA's founders believed that state governments would be better able than a federal agency to find and nurture artists and arts organizations in small towns and rural areas; they also believed that public arts funding decisions should not be dominated by a centralized arts bureaucracy. As a result, they encouraged the states to set up SAAs (U.S. Congress, 1961; Scott, 1970; Larson, 1983). The federal pass-through to the states, however, was not automatic: To receive NEA money, states were required to form their own arts agencies and make financial commitments to them through legislative appropriations. The goal was to ensure a broad base of political support for public funding of the arts. State residents—and, more immediately, their elected representatives—had to like SAA programs enough to help pay for them.

SAAs have already helped to achieve two of the founders' main objectives: Professional artists and arts organizations can now be found in towns and rural areas as well as larger cities across America, and state and local agencies are now responsible for distributing the lion's share of public arts grants (Kreidler, 1996; McCarthy et al., 2001; Barsdate, 2003). Achieving broad-based political support, however, has proven problematic. Despite indications that the majority of Americans believe in government funding for the arts (Pettit and DiMaggio, 1997; DiMaggio and Pettit, 1999), SAAs and other governmental arts agencies in recent years have struggled to translate generic public goodwill into effective political support (Wyszomirski, 1995; Lowell, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This report focuses on the arts agencies of the 50 U.S. states. Except where indicated, the analysis does not include arts agencies for the six U.S. special jurisdictions: American Samoa, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Virgin Islands.

<sup>2</sup> Six of the seven SAAs established prior to 1965 were voluntary organizations that received almost no state money. The New York State Council on the Arts was a notable exception. See Netzer, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Wyszomirski (1995), for example, argues that "while the American public may indicate positive attitudes towards the arts, these are seldom translated into active participation in the arts or firm support for governmental arts agencies" (p. 25).

By the 1990s, some SAA leaders had decided that their long-standing approaches to building and retaining political support were no longer working (RAND interviews).<sup>4</sup> Tight state budgets and a movement to “reinvent government” had created economic and political challenges for all state government agencies, and SAAs were among the most vulnerable. Finding themselves under threat, SAA leaders began seeking new ways to convince state officials to put the arts—and their agencies—higher on the list of governmental priorities. It was not simply a question of bolstering budgets, although SAAs certainly faced a tighter funding environment. Rather, these leaders wanted to obtain a “place at the table” of state government; that is, they wanted to make the arts an integral part of governmental planning for the future of their states.

This report identifies strategic issues faced by SAA leaders as they seek to solidify political support and expand public funding for the arts and their agencies. It is the second in a series of reports describing the findings of a RAND Corporation study of the changing missions and roles of SAAs. The Wallace Foundation has been funding the study as part of the State Arts Partnerships for Cultural Participation (START) initiative it launched in 2001. Through START, Wallace gave 13 SAAs multiyear grants in support of innovative programs, research, and outreach efforts aimed at increasing arts participation in their states.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, the START initiative was intended to identify, collect, and disseminate strategies that promise to strengthen SAAs' ability to serve state residents.

Our examination of the historical relations between SAAs and state governments suggests that elected officials in most states have had little input into SAA decision-making. In large part this was because of the way that SAAs were envisioned—and structured—by their founders, who believed in distancing arts grantmaking from possible political influence (Cwi, 1983; Mulcahy, 2002). But there is tension between this original, “arm's-length” approach to state government and SAAs' ability to attract and retain political support. Our research suggests that in recognition of this, some SAAs have begun to align their missions and goals more closely with the policy agendas of state government officials. Their aim is to work with state officials to catalyze and nurture state cultural activity—without allowing their agencies to become politicized in the process.

---

<sup>4</sup> We define *SAA leaders* as the executive director and assistant or deputy director of an SAA, plus the members of the SAA's board.

<sup>5</sup> The 13 START states are Arizona, California, Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, and Washington.

## Research Approach

This study was informed by structured and informal interviews with current and past SAA staff and board members, NEA staff, and arts policy consultants and researchers.<sup>6</sup> Between April 2002 and November 2005, RAND researchers conducted over 100 in-person, telephone, and e-mail interviews and substantive conversations with individuals from 28 states. Those interviewed were staff and board members from 23 SAAs, as well as state legislators, arts advocates, and past and former SAA grantees from Maine and Montana. The interviews covered a range of issues designed to provide qualitative insights into SAAs' strategic thinking within the different state contexts. Topics included relations between staff and board, the nature of SAA advocacy efforts, methods for expanding the SAA constituency base, and SAA history.

Our discussions of SAA history and state government structure are supported by a comprehensive survey of the literature on SAAs and the NEA, plus a review of the relevant academic literature on public administration. Our thinking about the current and future direction of SAAs has been greatly influenced by attendance at state-wide, regional, and national arts policy conferences and by participation in more than 15 START-related telephone conferences and workshops. Where possible, we support our conclusions with analyses of published and unpublished data generously provided by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) and the NEA, as well as published data from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and the National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO).<sup>7</sup>

Because the study involved 50 separate organizations, our portrayal of the past experience and current behavior of SAAs is necessarily broad-brush. We recognize that SAAs vary widely with respect to, among other things, the size of their budgets, the character of their state arts communities, the strength of their state economies, and the attitudes of state residents toward government and governmental support of the arts.<sup>8</sup> Whereas some SAAs have a long history of strong board-based governance and close relations with elected officials, our findings suggest that more of them (especially in the West) fit the historical profile sketched out in this report. Nonetheless, all SAAs face trade-offs connected with arm's-length versus "arm-in-arm" approaches to state government, and it seems likely that SAAs (like many other government organizations) will be more effective if they are able to address the issues of legitimacy and support, operational capacity, and public value that are described in Chapter Six.

---

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this report, we use the terms *board* and *board members* to refer to, respectively, the governing or advisory body of an SAA and the members of that body.

<sup>7</sup> We have particularly benefited from access to data from NASAA's Profile Survey, a periodic survey of the leadership, structure and authority, partnerships, and grant distribution policies of all SAAs; and from access to NEA Partnership Agreement narratives for fiscal years 2001–2004.

<sup>8</sup> By *arts community*, we mean the artists and nonprofit arts organizations that are potential recipients of SAA grants, plus those who regularly consume the art these artists and organizations produce.

To deepen the understanding of issues associated with SAAs' efforts to integrate themselves more fully into state government, this report includes case studies of two SAAs—the Montana Arts Council and the Maine Arts Commission—that have taken bold and innovative steps in this regard. We obtained the information for these case studies through site visits to the agencies and telephone interviews with approximately 30 current and past SAA staff and board members, current and past SAA grantees, and state legislators, all of which took place between November 2003 and April 2005. We also reviewed a number of published and unpublished historical documents provided by the two agencies.

We chose the Montana agency as one of our cases because we had learned of it through the START initiative and were struck by agency leaders' willingness and ability to tackle a severe political problem head-on. We chose the Maine case because NASAA suggested it to us as an example of a successful effort to craft a mission that has engendered widespread public and political support. However, we recognize that these two agencies are not particularly representative (both are small and located in highly rural states, and certain aspects of their situations are, of course, unique) and that details of their strategies may not be applicable to other SAAs. Nevertheless, important elements of these two agencies' experiences are similar to those of other SAAs seeking to strengthen their position within state government. They thus help to clarify the rewards—and the risks—of bringing the arts and political worlds closer together.

## Report Overview

Chapter Two of this report provides a brief overview of the structure of SAAs, describing how the arm's-length principle of governance operated in their early years (roughly 1965–1980), and how it has helped distance them from the political process in their states. Chapter Three analyzes the state-level political and budgetary trends over the last 20 years that are making the arm's-length principle untenable for SAAs in the future. Chapters Four and Five present, respectively, our case studies of the Montana Arts Council and the Maine Arts Commission, which illustrate SAAs' vulnerability to such trends and point to ways they might overcome it. Chapter Six considers the cases—and the situation of SAAs more generally—in light of a framework for public-sector management developed by Harvard University's Mark H. Moore, who emphasizes the need for strong agency leadership in choosing an appropriate mission and obtaining political support for it. Chapter Seven, the final chapter, concludes by summarizing the risks and rewards to SAAs of an arm-in-arm approach to state government.