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## Navigating the Public Funding Landscape: Lessons from One Small, Isolated, Rural, Arts Organization

Elise L. Kieffer

Murray State University, [ekieffer@murraystate.edu](mailto:ekieffer@murraystate.edu)

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## Navigating the Public Funding Landscape: Lessons from One Small, Isolated, Rural, Arts Organization

In 2012 a multi-disciplinary arts organization began in Burkesville, Kentucky, a town of just over 1,500 people in an impoverished county at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The community quickly embraced Burkesville Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA) because of their many educational offerings for children and their successful live performances, but local residents would never, on their own, be able to sustain the organization. Feeling that everything about the organization should make it a prime candidate for funding, in 2015, I, the founder and executive director, reached out to the Kentucky Arts Council (KAC) for assistance. They informed me that it would not be worth my time to pursue funding through KAC because the organization's budget was too small to make it worthwhile. They made no mention of the National Endowment for the Arts and extended no offers to aide a new director with a search for funding.

The organization continued to grow and thrive despite that lack of KAC support, but local fundraising continued to be limited by the financial means of the local population. Like directors around the United States, I learned that I could not count on public funding. "If one accepts the premise that public funding for the arts in the United States is inadequate and endangered, one searches immediately for alternatives" (Wilkerson, 2012, p. 105). Even with focused funding opportunities in creative placemaking and rural initiatives, many artists feel these programs limiting, rather than liberating (Fallon, 2012). The perceived and implied fundraising restrictions placed on BAFA affected programming choices, as we had to maximize ticket sales and tuition payments to support the organization. These restrictions also negatively impacted opportunities for local benevolence, by restricting the amount of discretionary funds available for students who desired to participate but had limited financial means.

Through the experience of one arts organization in an isolated, rural, Appalachian community of Kentucky, this paper explores the relationship between the NEA and the state arts agencies with which they partner. Using the case study of BAFA as an inspiration, this question is explored: If BAFA had received necessary technical support from the KAC, is it likely that it might have been awarded funding by the NEA? By comparing it to funded organizations in comparable communities, I hope to make this determination and recommend future support protocols.

### **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)**

The NEA boasts a mandate of "Art for All Americans" which it fulfills through its Rural Arts Initiative (arts.gov). When policymakers make strategic plans and funding decisions, they rely on the NEA for resource priorities. The NEA's narratives often marginalize alternative perspectives and serve as the justification for advancing certain programs, allocating funds, and assigning influence (Wirjau, 2012). In self-produced promotional resources, the NEA reports that between 2011 and 2014, they awarded 251 Our Town grants in 50 states and the District of Columbia. These grants have "reached 200 communities ranging in size from *small towns* such as *Conneaut Lake, PA* (population 600) to large cities like Phoenix, AZ (population 1.5 million)" (NEA, 2015; Redaelli, 2016, emphasis mine). Conneaut Lake, PA, the NEA's own choice to represent their funding of rural communities is, indeed, a small town. However, Conneaut Lake rests in Crawford County, PA with a population of 86,484 boasting seven school districts and two four-year colleges (crawfordcountypa.net). This begs the question, what is the actual impact

of the NEA on rural communities? NEA literature promotes that in FY 2016, thirteen percent of its total funding was allocated to rural, nonmetropolitan communities (arts.gov; Kieffer, 2020).

### **Kentucky Arts Council (KAC)**

Of the 129 grants, totaling \$1,375,789 that the Kentucky Arts Council distributed in FY 2017, 26 went to Appalachian counties and those grants totaled \$158,150. That means that less than 11.5 percent of funding in the state is being allocated to the most low-income communities. Further, according to the definitions of this study, only two of these counties qualify as small, isolated, and rural. Those two counties received collectively three grants totaling less than \$4,000, or 0.29 percent of state funding. That is the total state arts funding that was distributed to small, isolated, rural, arts organizations (SIRAO's) in the Appalachian region of Kentucky (Kentucky Arts Council, 2018, Kieffer, 2020).

### **Interactions Between NEA and SAAs**

DiMaggio (1991) introduced the idea of stereotyped roles for the NEA and SAAs in which the Endowment was tasked with supporting excellent artistry (historically interpreted as Western legacy institutions) while SAAs were empowered to support "support smaller organizations, younger artists, and programs advancing the goals of access, diversity, and equity" (p. 228). He considered these definitions to be misleading and largely inaccurate because his data from the NEA and SAAs indicated similar funding patterns across type of organization and disciplines. He concluded that often whether funding originated from the state or federal arts reserve, the same organizations were the recipients.

Receiving a grant from an SAA or the NEA has long been interpreted as a mark of ascension into sustainable validity as an artist or organization. This leads to the NEA supporting a more national perspective, while SAAs often tend to support more regionalized, specialty populations. In order to preserve the particular culture of their state, SAAs "must take a narrow view and seek to understand and support their state's ethnic, racial, or subcultural artistic expressions, even if these are seen as marginal or provisional by the mainstream" (Love, 1991, p. 218). This proved true for BAFA in the Appalachian region of Kentucky where much emphasis from the KAC is placed on the protection and continuity of folk art traditions, in favor of other art forms.

DiMaggio and Love wrote about public funding in 1991. Sidford, more recently, reviewed public and foundation funding for the arts. Those findings reinforced the understanding that, although much attention has been brought to funding inequities, and attempts have been made to rectify those imbalances, the environment has become more unbalanced in favor of large, legacy institutions. (Sidford, 2011; Sidford 2017). While the cultural landscape of the U.S. has diversified and grown, funding has not kept pace.

### **Methods**

As a methodology, case studies try to interpret a larger phenomenon through in-depth examination of specific cases, allowing the examination of organizations, communities, and relationships (Baxter & Jacks, 2008). They are descriptive, holistic and inductive, (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Case studies are bound by time and place (Stake, 1995). By limiting the study temporally, the findings ensure that the current state of communication is observed. Context is key and case study's binding of the study to place is important for ultimate findings. Because

case studies focus on the particular attributes of the cases studies, they are context specific.

Case study, as an experimental design, can be found as far back as the work of Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). Many note the origins of case study to anthropology and social science in the early twentieth century when researchers conducted lengthy, detailed ethnographic studies of individuals and cultures using case study designs (Harrison, et. al., 2017). Sociologists and anthropologists investigated individual's "lives, experiences, and how they understood the social and cultural context of their world, with the aim of gaining insight into how individuals interpreted and attributed meaning to their experiences and constructed their worlds" (Harrison, et. al., 2017). These researchers studied their subjects in a natural setting with descriptive, narrative results (Harrison, et. al., 2017).

Case studies have been historically criticized for their lack of generalizability and they saw some decline in usage during the latter half of the twentieth century when quantitative research was predominant. However, in the late 1900's, as grounded theory was developed and utilized, case studies made a resurgence in the social and political sciences as well as educational research (Harrison, et. al., 2017). "The integration of formal, statistical, and narrative methods in a single study, combined with the use of empirical methods for case selection and causal inference, demonstrated the versatility of case study design and made a significant contribution to its methodological evolution" and is part of the reason for its popular usage today (Harrison, et. al., 2017).

### **Limitations**

As the director of BAFA during the time studied, I am not an unbiased researcher approaching this topic. This study was motivated, at least in part, in an effort to contextualize my own experience of navigating the complexities of various public funding agencies while struggling to sustain an arts organization in a small, isolated community with limited arts exposure. While the data from the IRS, Census, and NEA are unbiased, published by those agencies, the interpretation of my own experience cannot be assumed to be strictly objective.

### **Philosophical Interpretation**

I utilized the philosophy of pragmatism as a mediator between KAC, the NEA and BAFA. Through this lens we can accept that all three entities hold distinct "truths" about priorities of their organizations and missions. The nature of individuality within the community resonates with KAC, NEA and BAFA as all seek individual goals but also direct those goals toward a common, mutually beneficial, goal of a successful arts and culture sector. Dewey, a founding pragmatic thinker, posited that value judgments served as a way to reassess and renegotiate courses of action toward problem solving (Anderson, 2014). Pragmatism can guide KAC as they serve the needs of myriad communities and organizations within the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Likewise, pragmatism can guide the NEA as they navigate changing political administrations and the diverse needs of an evolving nation. Pragmatism further allows us to accept individuality (BAFA) and selective interests within a pluralistic community, the broader jurisdiction of the KAC and NEA (Garrison, 2008). Dewey asserted the priority of community over individual. In this case, I translate that into a KAC community over an individual BAFA (Garrison, 2008). There can be a mutual recognition of difference and cross-border dialogue.

## Application

Because they are context driven, case study was the perfect vehicle for examining the relationship between BAFA, the Kentucky Arts Council (KAC), and the NEA. The temporal limitations of case studies are particularly relevant. This study paints a picture of the public funding atmosphere faced by BAFA while I was the executive director, from 2012-2017. Likewise, where Appalachian arts organizations like BAFA operate is central to how they operate. In addition, the history and politics of the region determines much of what is allocated to SAA's within the Appalachian region and what is required of them in return. The locality of the Appalachian Region is unique in the U.S. and the characteristics that define it are regional (Millesen, 2015), making case study a good match for examining this phenomenon.

## Data Collection

I conducted a search of the NEA grantee database for the year 2016, searching states that have counties falling within the jurisdiction of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), an agency that exists to facilitate economic growth and sustainability within the Appalachian region (arc.gov). The ARC operates in select counties in twelve states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, as well as all of West Virginia. Rural Appalachia is "an area characterized by low population density, geographic isolation, poor roads, and lack of public transportation" (Millesen, 2015, p. 129). My intention was to compare all organizations that received funding from the NEA in 2016, that were also located in towns with populations of less than 2,000, that also lie in counties under the mandate of ARC. Using these criteria, I identified the following seven organizations, all of whom received NEA grants through the Art Works program. One organization (Hindman, Kentucky) received an Our Town grant as well as the Art Works grant:

Young Harris College (Young Harris, Georgia, population 1,431, in Towns County with a population of 11,182)

Appalachian Artisan Center of Kentucky (Hindman, Kentucky, population 733, in Knott County with a population of 15,693)

Alleghany County Schools (Sparta, North Carolina, population 1,727, in Alleghany County with a population of 10,837)

Penland School of Crafts (Penland, North Carolina, population 200, in Mitchell County with a population of 15,579)

Glimmerglass Opera Theatre (Cooperstown, New York, population 1,770, in Otsego County with a population of 60,636)

Iroquois Indian Museum (Howes Cave, New York, population 861, in Schoharie County with a population of 31,582)

Contemporary American Theatre Festival (Shepherdstown, West Virginia, population

1,991, in Jefferson County with a population of 56,482)

The case study organization to which these NEA grant recipients will be compared is:

Burkesville Academy of Fine Arts (Burkesville, Kentucky, population 1,509, in Cumberland County with a population of 6,759)

All population data is from census.gov, for year 2016.

In order to determine whether these eight organizations existed in isolation or as part of artistic hamlets, each city name was entered into the Internal Revenue Service Exempt Organization Status Check to tally the number of arts or arts-related organizations operating in those communities (irs.gov). Finally, email inquiries were made to the five state arts agencies that represent these eight organizations to determine current technical support practices for arts organizations seeking federal funding through the NEA.

### **Findings**

An examination of the Appalachian organizations receiving funding from the NEA in 2016 reveals both similarities and differences as compared to our case study, BAFA. One key difference is population density. While all of these organizations rest in towns of less than 2,000, BAFA, in Cumberland County, Kentucky, with a population of less than 7,000, is substantially more isolated. Another difference lies in proximity to institutions of higher learning. Of the seven identified organizations, six are located in counties that also boast at least one four year college while the seventh organization (Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC) shares a county with the main campus of an accredited community college. Cumberland County, Kentucky does not share this advantage of local access to higher education and the resources that accompany that proximity.

A search of the IRS database revealed that the majority of these organizations are unique in their communities, notwithstanding the potential arts impact of colleges and universities.

#### Non-profit Arts and Culture Organizations by City According to the IRS

Bukesville, Kentucky - 1  
Hindman, Kentucky - 1  
Penland, North Carolina - 1  
Howes Cave, New York - 1  
Young Harris, Pennsylvania - 2  
Sparta, North Carolina - 3  
Shepherdsville, West Virginia - 4  
Cooperstown, New York – 12

The general trend, with some exceptions, is that the NEA funded organizations that provide unique arts experiences for their communities, opportunities that might be wholly unavailable without those organizations.

Correspondence with the state arts agencies that represent Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, New York and West Virginia confirmed the hypothesis that state arts agencies serving rural Appalachian communities are not providing technical support to assist organizations

through the NEA grant application process. Georgia Council for the Arts did offer that they sometimes pair new NEA applicants with organizations who have successfully received federal funding in the past, facilitating a sort of peer-to-peer mentorship.

### **Recommendations**

Kieffer (2020) explored the communication relationship between SAAs and SIRAOS in Appalachian Kentucky and Tennessee. That study revealed a similar disconnection between the needs of SIRAOS and the resources available through their SAAs. Additionally, that study highlighted misperceptions between arts administrators at SAAs and SIRAOS.

These studies both seem to uncover the need, at the state level, for a liaison with the primary job function to find small arts organizations and orient those organizations to the many resources available through their SAA. It is in the interests of both SAAs and SIRAOS to improve the quality and frequency of their communication.

In addition to that practical and functional solution, I recommend two avenues for future research. It would be beneficial to examine the communication relationship between state arts agencies and the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition, future research could examine the grant application process from the perspective of small, rural, arts organizations to determine why some successfully receive NEA funds while others, situated similarly, either do not receive funding or do not even apply. This research could serve to inform the technical support provided by state arts agencies to organizations in isolated, rural communities.

### **Conclusion**

This paper sought to determine if arts organizations serving the most isolated, rural populations really benefit from the NEA. A review of NEA grant recipients falling in towns of less than 2000 that also fall within the geographic reach of the Appalachian Regional Commission reveals that there is a gap in NEA funding. While small towns are awarded funding, these towns are, consistently, cradled within larger counties with nearby resources. These towns are rural, but not isolated.

The NEA sees their funding actively making a difference in large, small, urban and rural communities, in every congressional district (Nance, 2017). One wonders if the definition of rural might need to be reassessed. There are rural communities in the U.S. that exist as such deliberately. These are places, like Berea, Kentucky, a haven for artisans and creative progressives (bereaky.gov). The attributes that attract creative occupations to these rural areas might be natural amenities and opportunities for outdoor activity, and the like (Wojan & Nichols, 2018). However, the purpose of this paper has been to address the needs of those communities that are not rural by design, but by nature of their generational poverty, geographic isolation and lack of financial resources. Both types of community are classified as rural, but both populations do not exhibit the same needs. For the NEA and KAC to legitimately claim that they provide Art for all Americans, it is my recommendation that greater technical support should be provided to small communities through cooperation between the NEA and state arts agencies.

One of my greatest regrets, looking back on myself as that new executive director, is that I did not further pursue NEA funding. BAFA worked closely with the local school district to provide arts programming and education in a district otherwise devoid of arts opportunities. BAFA worked with the public library to collaborate on educational integration of arts, literature

and community. BAFA worked with the city and county governments to support local commerce and provide community enrichment for all socio-economic and racial groups within the community. BAFA impacted surrounding counties through school assemblies, live performances, educational enrichment opportunities and more. The NEA emphasizes that “broad partnerships are necessary to achieve good project outcomes; political support is essential ...and projects should be tied to local assets and knowledge; and arts-based activities must work in concert with other community development efforts, plans, and goals” (Chu & Schupbach, 2014, p. 67). BAFA did all of these things and boasted letters of endorsement from our county judge executive, mayor and every school administrator in our district. A review of the organizations awarded grants in 2016, cross-referenced with community data, makes a strong case that BAFA could well have been chosen for NEA funding, had local resources been available to guide me in that process, yet in a few phone calls with our representing state arts council we were discouraged from pursuing public funding.

The NEA remains endangered, weakened by current policies and is a controversial priority for the general American public (Wilkerson, 2012). In order to remain relevant in a time of political threat, the NEA should proactively make itself relevant to all Americans, even those in small, isolated communities (Nance, 2017). Their rural arts initiative efforts have certainly yielded a more comprehensive federal commitment to the arts, expressed in both funding and policy (Chu & Schupbach, 2014). It is not my intention to minimize the increased rural impact of the NEA, but by illuminating the disparities in funding, it is my hope that improvements can be made with regard to technical support. One of the greatest narratives the NEA has weaved to bolster favorable public opinion is their claim of providing equal access to the arts. “The Arts Endowment’s programs now reach into every corner of our nation—bringing the best of the arts and arts education to the broadest and most varied audiences” (Gioia, as cited in Wirjau, 2012, p. 320).

Maybe the NEA cannot reach all rural communities, but they can certainly strengthen relationships and communication with the state arts agencies that are closer to these communities. I did not call the NEA for help. I called the KAC, because that is where I lived and where my organization operated. The NEA functions with a centralizing role that coordinates third parties, earning access to more substantial resources and political capital than local organizations could hope to achieve (Redaelli, 2016). The NEA claims that they are looking at what is happening at the local level to frame a national discourse that is created through a bottom-up process (Redaelli, 2016).

Many local issues are also regional concerns, which indicates that if I had this challenge in an Appalachian county in Kentucky, then organizational leaders in other parts of the Appalachian region may well be facing the same struggle (Millesen, 2015). In my correspondence with the five state arts agencies relevant to this study, none of them revealed any deliberate efforts to facilitate NEA funding for small, rural arts organizations in their states. They all promoted their own grant programs with some peripheral support as matchmaker between past NEA grant recipients and prospective NEA grant applicants. It continues to be worth asking whether the lack of support through the NEA grant process is because state arts agencies see the NEA as competition. Further, the question should be asked if state arts agencies see the NEA as irrelevant or obtuse in their own jurisdictions. Both the NEA and SAAs have unique and necessary functions in the public funding landscape. Love (1991) coined these “important and distinct qualities that strengthen public support for the arts” (p. 227). Love suggested that the

NEA is capable of funding major institutions while SAAs could be critical for emerging young organizations as they develop. No one benefits from competition and lack of cooperation between and among arts organizations, the NEA and SAAs, including one small, isolated, rural arts organization in Appalachian, Kentucky.

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