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Rural and Regional Arts Organizations

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Learning Objectives – By the end of the chapter, readers will have the ability to:

- o Develop awareness of regionally specific arts administration challenges.
- o Understand the importance of regionally specific arts collaboration.
- o Reflect on the role of arts administrators as active participants in their communities
- o Better understand how the arts operate in rural communities.

Introduction

I recently spent a lot of time reading through job postings. A position at the University of Alaska Southeast specified, "Experience in the rural Circumpolar North preferred." Another job listing, for a New York institution required, "knowledge of local theatre scene is a must." These are two quite different locales, but both require particular awareness of their immediate region. Why? It seems like common sense. In order to work in a community, you need to know about the community. Whether that community is in Manhattan or Appalachia, awareness of the locality is requisite for successfully navigating as an arts administrator.

Accepting that necessity as truth, this chapter presents a case for the benefits of regional arts organizations and conferences to collectively approach common concerns within regions. It will also dive into the unique peculiarities of working specifically in rural communities. Through an exploration of two distinct regional arts organizations, this chapter makes the case for the importance and value of organizations that focus on regional issues. By combining forces with other local arts organizations, regional organizations find strength in numbers. However, by strategically limiting impact to the surrounding region these organizations are able to tackle those issue that perpetually define and challenge the regions in which they operate.

According to the United States Census, approximately 97% of United States' land area is within rural counties. Operating an arts organization in a rural community requires a largely different skill-set than doing the same job in a metropolitan setting. This chapter exposes the special importance of the unique skills and awareness required to operate a rural arts organization. The information contained in this chapter holds particular significance for three populations: Arts administration educators, students, and practitioners.

NEA

According to the National Endowment for the Arts 2013 report, just two percent of all cultural institutions in the United States receive nearly sixty percent of all funding. That two percent includes less than one thousand organizations, all with annual budgets of greater than five million dollars per year. This includes symphonies, opera companies, regional theatres, dance companies, and art museums, the vast majority of these promoting traditional Western European fine art (National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.). This reality leaves many regionally specific arts organizations behind.

This information begs the question, why does the current situation exist, and how might it affect the choices and perceptions of arts administrators operating with specific populations? Despite the seeming lack of public funding, arts organizations do exist serving specific populations. Here we will explore the reasons behind the relevance of two such organizations, and how those regional organizations navigate their unique place in their communities. The organizations in this chapter are, Southeastern Arts Leadership Educators (SALE) a new and growing conference of academics; and Appalshop, an Appalachian arts and culture organization that is over fifty years old and still going strong.

Swanson (2001) noted that the inclusion of local stakeholders was necessary for resource allocation. Miewald (2003) found that the state level is where contradictions between the information disseminated at the federal level, and the realities of allocation to localities become manifest. The NEA promotes Art for All Americans and boasts funding in every congressional district. That reality is breaking down somewhere between the federal mission and the local reality. The view that poverty is the result of poor values perpetuated generationally is the dominant way policymakers describe and understand the economic need (Carey, 2017). This leads to blaming the local victims. Continual social stratification then propagates a lack of social and economic opportunities within many communities.

State Arts Agencies (SAAs)

State Arts Agencies (SAAs) serve arts and culture organizations throughout their states. Historically, national arts policies respond to the economic and cultural environment of the nation, (Rosenstein, Riley, Rocha & Boenecke, 2013), while the SAA has the capacity to set state arts priorities by being directly in touch with both local organizations and local citizens. SAAs can often be proactive, rather than reactive. The SAA does for the state what the National Endowment for the Arts tries to accomplish nationally.

At the national level, to promote bi-partisan support, the NEA strategically funds every congressional district in the United States. This ensures that rural, suburban, and metropolitan areas all receive some measure of funding (National Endowment for the Arts, 2016). I would argue that for SAAs to accomplish a comparable equity of giving, they could make a deliberate action to fund every county within their states. This would achieve the same goal of funding both metropolitan and rural counties within those states, and would also include small, isolated, rural communities along with larger cities.

SAAs are uniquely necessary to ensure the equitable distribution of national arts and culture resources, distributed through the NEA and the NEH (NASAA, 2019). SAAs also ensure that their states have representation with these national organizations, so that the voice of their state's arts and culture industry is heard at the federal level. Additionally, SAAs are situated to represent all of the individual communities in the state, by carefully considering resource allocation and equitable distribution of funding to organizations in many disciplines, serving different localities (NASAA, 2019).

SAAs recognize the need for organizations to improve professionalization of services. They serve a broad constituency, much larger than any single SIRAO. They also must facilitate advocacy on behalf of the arts, though they are, themselves, prohibited from advocating (NASAA, 2019). Those are just a few examples of the many priorities that SAAs identify and must struggle to address. With limited resources to be allocated throughout entire states, SAAs must choose based on predetermined criteria, what to fund, where to fund, and how to determine recipients of resources.

GAP at Regional/Local Level

Swanson (2001) noted that the inclusion of local stakeholders was necessary for resource allocation in rural communities. That inclusion might increase awareness on both sides. Miewald (2003) found that the state level is where contradictions between the information disseminated at the federal level, and the realities of allocation to localities become manifest. The NEA promotes Art for All Americans and boasts funding in every congressional district. That reality is breaking down somewhere between the federal mission and the local reality. The view that poverty is the result of poor values perpetuated generationally is the dominant way policymakers describe and understand the economic need (Carey, 2017). This leads to blaming the local victims. Continual

social stratification then propagates a lack of social and economic opportunities within Appalachian communities. Meanwhile, the government (including SAAs) often does not have an accurate portrait of isolated, rural communities (Wuthnow, 2013). Isolated, rural communities often do not realize what public services they are missing.

Understanding Local Cultures

Just as Western colonialists approached the project of "civilizing" indigenous cultures throughout the world, they still approach their interactions with people of difference (Anglin, 2004). Social identities are based on our membership in certain demographic categories, the roles we play in our families and communities, our careers or memberships in certain groups and our membership in stigmatized groups. Only by diving deeply into the particular characteristics that define our distinct regions can we hope to identify and address challenges.

According to Ortiz and Flanagan (2002), "The very essence of what an individual believes, thinks, and does is a product of unique background and developmental experiences that are most often shaped and determined primarily by culture" (p. 337). It is vital to remember that knowing our own culture, our own identities and positionalities is the first step to cross-cultural communication (Tomes, 2013). Tomes enforced that gathering culturally relevant information about the group to be encountered prior to interactions is central to the success of those interactions. Steps for gathering information begin with establishing rapport, removing hierarchies, emphasizing respect, and listening carefully. Additionally, Valadez (2004) identified trust and open dialogue as an absolute necessity when engaging in cross-cultural interactions.

Benjamin (1996) considered that narrating the "now" required awareness of the "then." We cannot move forward without recognizing our context, both in time and locality. This includes the specific contextual importance of "regions." Benjamin also concluded that historical

integrity requires a multicultural narrative, and contextualized narratives should reflect that. By acknowledging those traits, characteristics, and differences that keep us apart, we are often able to find a common ground and then come together. Different voices from across any given region provide that strength.

Culture underscores all of our life practices and serves as the filtering framework for every thought and action (Tomes, 2013). Tomes defined culture as "the social transmissions of beliefs, values, practices, and behaviors of a group of cognitively-homogeneous individuals. Moreover, culture is not static, but a fluid and dynamic aspect of beliefs and behaviors that have been influenced by new information and new experiences" (p. 6). Core elements of culture include identity, communication, education, and health. The subject of cross-cultural communication is important when exploring professional interactions (Tomes, 2013).

Case Studies

Appalshop

The Appalachian Region Commission (ARC), is an agency that exists to facilitate economic growth and sustainability within the Appalachian region, defines the geographic area considered Appalachia within this study. 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.

The ARC was founded by an act of congress in 1965 and is tasked with five key goals. These goals include increasing economic opportunities within the region, improving workforce readiness, developing and maintaining critical infrastructure, utilizing and leveraging natural and cultural assets within the region, and developing leadership and community capacity (ARC, 2019). This area is defined by persistent poverty and reduced economic opportunity (Grossman,

Humphreys, & Ruseski, 2019). In her work in the Appalachian region of Ohio, Millesen (2015) noted that local issues within Appalachia are often shared by many localities within the region. Local issues are, in fact, Appalachian region issues. It is these very concerns that the ARC was established to negotiate and mitigate, yet the ARC does not routinely fund the arts or arts activities. This area of need within Appalachian communities remains unmet.

Despite the 1965 establishment of the Appalachian Regional Commission, problems of poverty, low education, population decline, and access to services remain in the region. Little has changed to improve or further develop the region from that time until the twenty-first century (Sarnoff, 2003). Practical, working solutions based on thorough research are necessary to understand and approach these problems, including the issue of access to the arts.

In 1962, Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America*, in which he confronted the pervasive and generational poverty existent in pockets across the United States. This publication was largely credited with inspiring the subsequent War on Poverty that dominated much policymaking in the United States during the late twentieth century (Sarnoff, 2003). In an updated 2003 edition, 41 years later, Sarnoff acknowledged that the characteristics of impoverished Appalachia, first recognized by Harrington in 1962, continue to persist. Vance affirmed the same sentiment in 2016.

Vance and Ford (2015) referenced a survey of Southern Appalachians over twenty-five years ago that concluded that the basic problems of the Appalachian region came from misinformed use of the land, and the proportion of empty land to population. They then noted that little has changed in the intervening years that would change or improve those factors. "The apparent prosperity of the metropolitan areas of the Region, *as compared with the rural areas*, must be reassessed…. out-migration exceeded in-migration in all except one, Roanoke"

(p. 290). This disparity of metropolitan as compared to rural culture within Appalachia is relevant when exploring the specific needs of the isolated, rural communities included in this study. The arts, it would seem, are not the only arena in which rural areas encounter inequitable access.

The arts provide unique value to rural communities. Rural areas often face excessive out-migration of youth and the heavy burden of growing senior populations. Reduced tax revenues caused by fewer working-age adults leads to a lack of support for infrastructure improvements, longer commute times to quality employment, poor employment conditions, and low levels of entrepreneurship (Balfour, Fortunato, & Alter, 2018). Arts-based development facilitates growth and a sense of community within rural areas. Collaborating on arts initiatives helps build community capacity. Through strategic creative placemaking efforts, the National Endowment for the Arts and individual SAAs have made strides to enhance and enrich rural communities with the arts (Frenette, 2017). This study will drive those efforts forward by determining the nature of SAAs' relationships with their most isolated, rural, citizens, in the hope that those communities can achieve artistic enrichment and fulfillment.

According to Horwitz (1974), much of the historically produced arts and crafts in the Appalachian Region derive from the isolation of the region. What the people needed, the people crafted. The isolation that led to the persistent and systemic poverty in the region also provided the environment for the development of a strong crafting tradition. Like frontier settlers throughout the United States' history, they made quilts because they needed blankets. They made axes because they needed tools. They made barrels, linens, and clay crocks because they needed to use them. If something was necessary, the only way to obtain it was for them to build it.

The introduction of the railroad to the Appalachian Region revived tourist destinations in communities including Berea, Kentucky, and Gatlinburg, Tennessee (Barker, 1991). In these communities, traditional Appalachian arts and crafts are still thriving and supporting Appalachian artisans. The Cumberland Gap region, central to this study, differs, with many communities of K-12 public schools struggling to maintain the inclusion of any arts curriculum within their schools (Graff, 2012). The most isolated communities are so economically depressed that they have lost pride in their cultural heritage, making the need to preserve their artistic traditions and promote artistic innovation more necessary. I propose that this gap in public arts education makes the impact of nonprofit arts organizations even greater in these isolated communities.

The History of Appalshop

In their study of procedural inequities in the mining process in Appalachia, Leciejewski and Perkins (2015) quoted Appalachian residents as avowing that the state does not care about them or their struggles. Appalshop, a successful and thriving organization in Whitesburg, Kentucky, was founded in 1969 as a development effort to fight the War on Poverty.

Originally called, the Appalachian Film Workshop, it was one among ten different Community Film Workshops initiated through a partnership between the federal Office of Economic Opportunity and the American Film Institute (Appalshop, n.d.). In 1974 the organization officially evolved into a nonprofit, renamed Appalshop. It became a hub of filmmaking in Appalachia, producing projects on the regionally important subjects of coal mining, the environment, traditional culture, and the economy.

In addition to films, Appalshop also produces theater, music, and spoken-word recordings, photography, multimedia, and books. They also operate a local radio station

serving central Appalachia that features regionally relevant programming. According to their own promotional materials, "Appalshop's goals are: to document, disseminate, and revitalize the lasting traditions and contemporary creativity of Appalachia; to tell stories the commercial cultural industries don't tell, challenging stereotypes with Appalachian voices and visions; to support communities' efforts to achieve justice and equity and solve their own problems in their own ways; to celebrate cultural diversity as a positive social value; and to participate in regional, national, and global dialogue toward these ends" (About Us, n.d.).

Regional Importance. "The challenge of "outsider" status when discussing Appalachian communities is well researched, specifically the concept of educated outsiders (Azano & Stewart 2015 & 2016; Vance 2016; Fisher & Smith 2012; Kahn, 2012; Grimes, Haskins and Paisley 2013; Brown & Swanson 2013). Azano and Stewart (2015 & 2016) addressed the challenges faced by teachers entering public schools as outsiders, entering the community from other regions. Their studies explored the influence of those teachers' efforts, along with how students' sense of place and their educational upbringing are related to the educators' perceptions entering the rural school.

"Outsider" status in an Appalachian community is broadly defined. As expected, it describes one who is not originally from the community, but that status is also applied to former insiders who choose to leave the community. If and when they should return, they are no longer wholly "in" (Vance 2016). Vance asserted this reality from the perspective of the "insider", "And what was most important was to push them [outsiders] out as quickly as possible" (Gross 2016). Fisher & Smith (2012) quoted Appalachian natives as believing that outsiders with agendas move in to take over the land and all of its many resources. This local sentiment seems to be reinforced by negative stereotypes of Appalachian people in popular culture combined with persistent corporate

oppression of local communities. The unfortunate outcome of this perpetual cataloguing of locals as hillbillies has fed the local narrative that insiders are "good" and outsiders are "bad" (Fisher & Smith, 2012, p. 270). The history of the region as a political ground for personal advancement at the expense of exploiting the local population has formed long-lasting and perpetuating memories of skepticism toward anyone from the outside who comes offering something new. Generations of locals have seen outsiders come and go, each with their own agendas, none staying for long and all trying to change a way of life" (Kieffer, 2018, p. 3).

For this reason, perhaps more than any other, Appalshop has succeeded. Appalshop proudly proclaims that, "Appalachian people must tell their own stories and solve their own problems" (Flood & Vogel, 2009). Being worker-run and worker-centered, Appalshop has allowed the people of the Appalachian region to trust their name, their information, their motives, and their disseminated products. If an outside organization had released the same products, it seems unlikely those products would have been met with the same acceptance. Within Appalachia, being an "insider" matters. Being founded and dedicated to the region accounts for Appalshop's historic and continued success.

Southeastern Arts Leadership Educators (SALE)

Regional History

It seems unnecessary to explain the racial and social history of the Southern United States. While none of the nation is without blemish in its race relations, the South (particularly those original eleven Southern states that seceded from the Union to during the Civil War to form the Confederate States of America: Those eleven states were South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

More than any other region in the U.S., the South perpetuated the enslavement of Black citizens. Following Emancipation, the South continued to withhold equal opportunities to people of color through the Jim Crow era's laws and restrictions. Still decorated with monuments honoring the men who fought to maintain the right to enslave others, the South has yet to face a true reckoning with its past and the implications of that past on the present and future. Arts administration educators and practitioners work in the midst of this complicated environment. The challenges they face might not be entirely unique, but they are uniquely potent.

Founding of SALE

"Southeastern Arts Leadership Educators (SALE) supports the definition, teaching, theory, and practice of transformative arts administration in the southeastern United States" (Mission Statement). At their first conference, held in Atlanta, Georgia in April 2018, a gathering of arts administrators from Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, South Carolina, and North Carolina met and drafted the above mission statement. All shared the feeling that current arts administration professional organizations did not meet the specific needs of the southeastern United States, a region always confronting the effects of its history of racial and social injustice. That group of educators negotiated, haggled, and discussed until they finally settled on that one significant word, "transformative."

As arts leadership educators, the profound feeling in the room was that the status quo did not and would not work to meet the needs of the diverse population of students in the Southeast. Likewise, in order to responsibly prepare those students for future success, the arts could not just "be." The arts, like most other aspects of life in the South, had to be strategic. They have to be transformative.

SALE continues to grow and, although it experienced setbacks like most other organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is currently planning its fourth annual conference. Through sharing and collaboration, the founding members of this organization discovered that many of the problems they faced individually are, in fact, regional. As they began building the SALE conference, they discovered connections in unexpected relationships and learned from the successes and failures of others confronting similar obstacles.

At their third conference, held February of 2020 in Charleston, South Carolina, the members confronted a choice. The conference had grown substantially since its founding. The question posed was this, "Should we continue to grow by reaching out beyond the Southeast, or do we maintain our specific geographic focus?" After discussion, members reached the conclusion that the reasons the organization came to be persisted. In order to fight the long shadows of the Southeastern region's racial past, the organization had to remain focused. Problems of racial inequity and injustice faced at one Southern university would likely be similar or the same as the struggles at a small Southern private liberal arts college. Many of those challenges come from the shared history of the region, rather than from the type of institution.

The conference concluded that only by remaining geographically focused on the Southeastern United States could they continue to tackle the specific stumbling blocks faced by arts leadership educators in their region. Certainly, some lessons on creative justice, diversity, equity, access, and inclusion are broadly transferable, even internationally. The truth remains, however, that the Southern U.S. shares a unique responsibility for reconciling those struggles they were so integral in creating.

It is not unusual that the struggles one organization within a region faces are also faced by others. The evolution of SALE as an example of a successful and impactful regional gathering

provides a model that other regions might consider replicating to confront their own shared difficulties.

Conclusion

In his 1989 piece, *The Arts Manager's Social Responsibility*, Keller (1989) noted that it is the role of the arts manager to coordinate and administer community activities incorporating the arts into society at large. The arts manager bears the responsibility of making the arts relevant and impactful within the community she/he serves. Keller blamed arts administrators for the failure to incorporate large portions of the population into the audience of the arts. It is not the public's responsibility for their ignorance of the arts or lack of participation. Nor are they to blame for the reality that they are underserved by arts organizations. The blame lies with the arts administrators who have failed to engage them. "If today's institutions tend to be more the symbol than the cause of the inequities of society, what role should the institutions play in rectifying the imbalance" (Keller, 1989, p. 50)? Keller wrote about the responsibility of today's organizations in 1989. Although published thirty years ago, this text remains relevant and urgent today as a lone voice speaking to the particular responsibility of arts administrators to engage within their communities, rather than wait for their communities to come to them.

A broad search for more contemporary academic literature on the topic produced an unfortunate lack of recent voices articulating Keller's strategies or the urgency of his sentiments. He endorsed an approach that requires arts administrators to step out of their standard modus operandi and into an active role of communicating and engaging with their constituencies. This requires crossing cultures and interacting with others deliberately and strategically.

The successful arts administrator needs to know their community, and their region. This chapter introduced a model organization that highlights the importance of networking within a

common region. The chapter also explored the distinct characteristics of managing the arts in a

rural setting. Location matters and context is key. Every other chapter in this book provides

valuable information on one aspect of managing an arts organization. This chapter served to

illustrate how all of those skills need to be assessed and reassessed based upon the individual

characteristics of the arts manager's community.

Summary

This chapter included brief histories of Appalachia and the Southern United States as

distinct regions. It explored two specific organizations (Appalshop and SALE) that work within

those locales. Through this information, readers were encouraged to develop an awareness of

regionally specific arts administration challenges and to understand the importance of regionally

specific arts collaboration. The chapter concluded with a reflection on the role of arts

administrators as active participants in their communities.

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Further Reading

1. Keller, A. S. (1989). The Arts Manager's Social Responsibility, *Arts Management and Law, 19*(2), 44-54. ***This is a must-read for understanding the strategic and deliberate steps required of the arts administrator and organization to be relevant within their communities.***

2. Kieffer, E. L. (2018). I landed a U.F.O. on Main Street: An autoethnography of the founding of   an arts education organization in Appalachian Kentucky. *The International Journal of Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts, 14*(1), 3-15. ***This article provides a first-hand encounter of the regional difficulties confronting one arts administrator as she attempted to transfer her education and experience into a new locale. The struggles are specific but the lessons of relevance and adaptability are universal.***

3. Appalshop.org ***Visit their website to learn more about Appalshop and its fifty-year history working within the Appalachian region.***

4. Millesen, J. (2015). Understanding collective impact in a rural funding collaborative: Collective grantmaking in Appalachian Ohio. *The Foundation Review,* (4), 128. ***Millesen provides another example of regional collaboration and its benefits for the nonprofit sector as a whole.***

5. Swanson, L. E. (2001). Rural policy and direct local participation: Democracy, inclusiveness, collective agency, and locality-based policy. *Rural Sociology, 66*(1), 1-21. ***For more information about the intricacies of regionally and geographically specific policy-making, Swanson provides an exploration of the importance of local social,***

economic, and physical infrastructures in mediating effective policy implementation.

6. Grossman, D. S., Humphreys, B. R., & Ruseski, J. E. (2019). Out of the outhouse: The impact of place-based policies on dwelling characteristics in Appalachia. *Journal of Regional Science*, 59(1), 5–28. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/10.1111/jors.12398. ***This article explores the ARC and its deliberate efforts designed to identify regional challenges and improve economic conditions in the Appalachian region.***

Discussion Questions

1. Think about where you are located and identify challenges that are unique to your community.
2. What strategies can the arts manager execute to successfully navigate their community?
3. Do you think arts organizations should operate independently or is collaboration a good idea?
   a. Why do you feel that way?
   b. Identify the positive and negative potential for working independently and collaborating.
4. In what ways does the region in which the arts organization operates influence or inform the art produced at the organization?
5. Assume the arts are uniquely susceptible to the challenges and pitfalls of local influences. Identify several reasons why that might be and provide guidance for how the arts manager might mitigate them.