



NATIONAL PERFORMING ARTS CONVENTION TAKING ACTION TOGETHER DENVER 2008

Assessing the field's capacity for collective action

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Executive Summary

The National Performing Arts Convention in Denver was an extraordinary convening, designed specifically to build community and define collective goals for the performing arts field. Through its process, professionals from multiple performing arts disciplines and different organizational roles found meaningful time to connect, to share concerns, and to build a sense of shared purpose. But also through this process, participants and hosting partners had a unique opportunity to observe the nature of those interactions, and explore where connections and disconnections were most pronounced.

Before, during, and after the convention, a cross-disciplinary team of academic leaders and graduate students came together to make those observations, and to advance our understanding of the field's capacity for collective action. Looking through the lens of social theory, we explored the *community building, capacity building, and opportunity structures* that inform effective collective action, to determine where the performing arts stood on the road to productive influence at the national, regional, and local scale.

This report outlines our discoveries throughout the process, which included:

Community Building

- *Shared sense of the field's boundaries*
Participants struggled to define the boundaries of the “performing arts field,” with many focusing on primarily professional, nonprofit organizations that present, produce, or promote live performance. Others wondered whether commercial, amateur, informal, community, or even mediated forms of performing arts – television, recordings, or on-line, for example – were part of the community or separate from it. This lack of a shared boundary may be limiting the field's ability to mobilize, and to define allies for their collective work.
- *Value of collaboration: Eager and ready to explore*
While participants predominantly focused on local and organizational issues in their discussions and future strategies, they were already engaged in partnerships with other disciplines and sectors – schools, social service agencies, learning initiatives. Further, they seemed ready for more. There seems to be real opportunity in fostering these connections on a smaller scale that would serve the dual purpose of building trust and the capacity to work collectively toward a larger goal.
- *Shared interests, values, and mission: Differences in language and meaning*
For many, these were the first meaningful conversations with practitioners from other disciplines. A good portion of the AmericaSpeaks sessions (a public participation process used to generate a collective action agenda for

the field), and other shared events, was spent defining the similarities and differences between disciplines, their operational challenges, and their policy connections. These were important conversations, but seemed to mark the beginning of a longer process of relationship building.

- *Shared goals and priorities*

While the priorities emerging from the AmericaSpeaks process were ones that have been with the performing arts for some time, there still remains ambiguity around how these priorities are interpreted. While arts education provides a clear mandate, what is meant by the priorities related to diversity and advocacy requires further discussion and clarification. Further, in relation to advocacy, while respondents emphasize the importance of a unified, strong, “right” message, there does not seem to be consensus about what that message should be or whether “one message” is appropriate for all.

Capacity Building

- *Accessing and mobilizing community members and allies: Talking vs. listening*
Survey responses and convention conversations showed a strong interest in inviting elected officials from local, state, and national government in future NPAC conversations. Yet respondents seemed largely disconnected from these officials in their decision processes and in their local engagement. There is much productive work to be done in building policy awareness, listening/facilitation skills, and other basic elements of effective policy action with these key actors.
- *Acquiring, deploying and sharing resources: Often unaware of the terrain*
The primary focus on local and organizational issues also seems to influence a general lack of awareness or significant attention to national-level resources, policy details, and cross-disciplinary initiatives. Rather than creating *more* such national and cross-disciplinary initiatives, this suggests a larger effort to redefine and redeliver such existing initiatives in a way that connects to local and organizational needs. Examining and developing the extant systems for knowledge sharing across the field is a first and necessary step toward building capacity for collective action.
- *Creating action plans: Competing scope and scale*
Even as they convened to explore national issues and overarching goals for the field, participants thought, spoke, and planned most effectively at the local or organizational level. Through this lens, national initiatives and collective action often lacked the same perceived benefit and impact as local action. A national initiative would be more successful if it leveraged and responded to the local/organizational interests of arts practitioners, rather than expecting them to naturally shift their focus to a larger scale.

- *Creating effective decision-making and implementation processes for action plans: Ready to help, but not sure how*

Finally, participants were energized by the convening in Denver, and willing to continue a more collaborative effort to advance collective goals. But many were unsure how to do so. They returned to their organizations prepared to take action on local or organizational levels, but were unsure who “owned” the larger agenda. Some were unsure if the National Performing Arts Convention was a separate organization that would continue, or if they would be coordinating work with their primary NSO, ad hoc action groups, or other entities.

The remainder of this report describes the source of these discoveries in greater detail, and concludes with recommendations for moving forward.