Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (1979-1992): Correspondence 02

Iona B. Dobbins

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March 16, 1992

The Honorable Claiborne deB. Pell
335 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC    20510

Dear Senator Pell:

It was a pleasure meeting with you and Sandy last week.

Karen and I want you to know how much we appreciate the time and concern you have demonstrated in support of the National Endowment for the Arts. I am sure in the months ahead the NEA will be under continuous attack. Please know, however, that the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts is ready to assist you in whatever way we can.

I have enclosed information that we mentioned at our meeting last week. I thought you might like to have it on file.

The first is a copy of the results of a survey which the Arts Council compiled in developing its long range plan. I have also included a copy of an article that I recently wrote for a new and upcoming quarterly arts magazine, Quix. It might be of help in providing a context on the issue of public funding of the arts within a historical perspective.

Again, I can't tell you how grateful we are for your continued support and many, many thanks.

Sincerely,

Iona B. Dobbins
Executive Director

IBD:KW
Enclosures
INTRODUCTION

In January, 1990, the Policy and Planning Committee of the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts began to review the agency's progress on its previous plan, and to gather information that would form the basis of a plan for the coming three years. It was agreed that significant community input was needed early in the process in order to identify trends that will influence the arts community of the state over time.

In order to raise this information, a survey of RISCA's constituency was undertaken. The survey was mailed to a random sample of four hundred individuals on RISCA's mailing list. In all, 54 surveys were returned, for a return rate of 13.5%.

The purpose of the survey was to test the level of awareness of specific RISCA initiatives and the perceived level of effectiveness of these initiatives, as well as to determine constituent perceptions of environmental threats and opportunities that might influence the arts in the coming years. A small number of descriptors of respondents was also gathered.

Respondents were asked to indicate with which constituent groups they identified themselves. Twenty respondents indicated more than one category. It is interesting to note that 10 respondents indicated that they are both an artist and an educator. In all, by combining the two staff categories, arts organization staff represent 21.5% of the respondents, since some respondents indicated that they are employed by both a RISCA funded organization and an organization not funded by RISCA.

Respondents were asked to indicate both the level of their awareness of a range of RISCA activities as well as whether the efforts are effective in bringing additional resources to supporting Rhode Island's arts community. For each item listed, the awareness and effectiveness was cross-tabulated. A consistent pattern emerged in these results: respondents were far more likely to indicate that they are aware of an initiative than to express an evaluative opinion. Overall, respondents expressed little dissatisfaction with any of the initiatives listed.

Relative to trends, respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements and to judge whether the trends represented a critical impact, a significant impact, or minimal impact in the next five years in Rhode Island. The following Table shows the number of respondents, the mean of their responses, and the standard deviation for each trend statement. Since a "1" represented critical impact and "3" represented minimal impact, the mean scores closest to 1 represent the respondents perception of the most critical trends.

The trends judged to have the most critical impact were: (1) the economy; (2) the loss of curriculum related to the arts in public education; (3) changes in corporate philanthropy. The least significant trends were (1) competition for leisure time; (2) the aging of the American population; and (3) emerging new art forms.

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<thead>
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<th>TABLE: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR TREND STATEMENTS</th>
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<td>#</td>
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<td>The economic outlook for the private and public sector</td>
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TABLE CONT'D: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR TREND STATEMENTS

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<td>The changing nature of corporate philanthropy</td>
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<td>1.57</td>
<td>.683</td>
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<td>The changing profile of the individual donor</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>.712</td>
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<td>The reduction of arts-related curriculum in public education</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>49</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>.606</td>
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<td>Increasing ethnic diversity of the American public</td>
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<td>1.85</td>
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<td>The debate over censorship and public funding of the arts</td>
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<td>Competition for leisure time</td>
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<td>The increasing illiteracy of the American public</td>
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<td>The relationship of arts organizations and individual artists</td>
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<tr>
<td>The emergence of new art forms</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>.742</td>
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ADDITIONAL THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Thirty-five respondents used the space provided to identify additional threats and opportunities or to elaborate further on their responses to the trend statements.

The most often mentioned issue was concern about public education and the deterioration of the arts in curriculum. The second most often mentioned concern was the seeming pending collapse of government support for the arts at the state and national level.

In addition, the Policy and Planning Committee conducted three public forums during February, March and April in order to allow the general public as well as constituents to present views to the Council concerning issues or trends. Concern about the falling Rhode Island economy and its effect on funding of arts organizations as well as the critical link between the arts in public education and audience development were confirmed as critical issues.

Additional serious concerns emerged from these sessions. These were: the lack of a cohesive arts community capable of acting in concert on issues of mutual concern linked with the lack of consumer advocacy for the arts; audience development as a separate and larger issue than the link to public education; self-support for arts organizations - the need to enhance the ability of arts organizations to generate
their own operating funds.

At a subsequent meeting of the Policy and Planning Committee in May, it was confirmed that the most critical trends that would influence the arts community in the next three years, and therefore should form the basis for the next Long Range Plan, are the following:

1. The economy, specifically, the ways in which shrinking resources should effect the actions of the RI State Council on the Arts.
2. Public Education and the lack of integration of arts programming.
3. Audience development.
4. The lack of a cohesive arts community, and the lack of consumer advocacy for the arts.
5. The need for arts organizations to generate operating income through their own efforts.

At a Council/staff retreat held in early June, it was confirmed that these issues are the most critical to address. Other issues were discussed but it was recognized that faced with reduced operating funds, with little likelihood of recovery in the near future, RISCA needs to focus its activities upon those issues that are likely to have the largest impact.

At this same retreat, Council member and staff teams discussed each issue and began to determine strategies that might successfully address the needs identified. It was also agreed that, to the degree possible, these initiatives should not have a financial impact on the programmatic priorities of the previous plan: services and access to grant opportunities for individual artists; the strengthening of the technical assistance efforts of RISCA (though the priorities within this function may shift); and the continued pursuit of partnerships on behalf of the arts (again, with some shift in emphasis).

Five major initiatives will be supported by the RI State Council on the Arts during the next three years, by means of the core functions of RISCA. These five initiatives are:

1. The design and implementation a marketing plan for the arts in the state;
2. Increased emphasis on, and education about, advocacy for the arts; including support for a Citizens for the Arts organization;
3. Focusing of efforts on changing attitudes and actions of public officials concerning the deterioration of the arts in public education;
4. Empowerment and self-support as the priorities for training and education efforts, as well as encouragement of self-support through grant requirements and incentives;
5. An effort to move a greater number of activities to the grass-roots and/or community-based level in order to enhance the visibility of the arts and to involve the broadest possible constituency for the arts.

It was also agreed that the new plan will be organized around the core functions of RISCA as defined in the last Long Range Plan: (1) Grantmaking, (2) Facilitation and Information Services, and (3) Partnerships. For each core function, progress on the prior plan is reviewed, continuing initiatives are identified and new initiatives are listed.
Right-Sizing Public Funding Support of the Arts

Welcome aboard Quix, and congratulations to the co-founders of this new quarterly arts magazine, Paula Martesian and Ken Carpenter. Their vision to broaden awareness of Rhode Island artists and the arts that surround us through a quarterly arts magazine will provide an important service to the arts community and citizens alike.

When Paula invited me to write a column for this first issue of Quix, I asked her if there was a particular topic she would like me to address. She said "write anything you feel passionate about."

There is, indeed, a critical issue facing our country at this time, and about which I feel very passionate. It is public funding support of the arts. As director of an agency that delivers services and funding in support of artists, arts organizations and arts in education, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the slippage in public support of the arts is deepening on both the federal and state levels.

Across the country, state arts councils are being threatened with elimination or else they are trying to manage with drastically reduced budgets. On the national level, funding to the National Endowment for the Arts has remained stagnant for the past ten years. Municipalities faced with budget restraints put the fiscal reins on school committees who in turn decide that the arts can be eliminated from the schools' curricula.

The operative words in government and business today are downsizing and retrenchment. Many of the measures being taken to downsize governments, municipalities and schools may appear to some a
reasonable course of action. At issue here, however, is whether the arts have ever reached a level of support in this country where they can afford to be down sized. Yet, the whittling and cutting back on public funds in support of the arts continues at a disturbing rate.

In my opinion, and certainly it is an opinion shared by many others, perhaps we have reached the point where we need to consider right sizing public support of the arts. The available data which profiles per capita funding of the arts in the industrialized countries puts the United States at the bottom of the group. (Currently, the State Arts Council's appropriation represents six hundredths of one percent of a 1.4 billion dollar state budget.) The federal and state governments together spend about $2 per capita on the arts in the United States. The Swedish government spends an estimated $35 per capita; Canadian spending is $32, Dutch $27, and West German $27, according to estimates by arts writer Joseph McLellan in the Washington Post. Another source, the Economist, says the British per capita figure is about $9; the French, about $30.

So why does the struggle for arts support in the United States seem to be so on-going? Why is it that decision makers do not perceive the arts as an important cornerstone in our society, something worthy of support? Perhaps a historical perspective will help us understand the context in which the arts have been placed since the beginning of this, still, very young country.

Of course, I have gleaned only slight insight into these questions that plague so many of us. First, the framers of our constitution recognized the arts only once in that great document.
Article 1, Section 8 states: Congress shall have the power to
"promote the progress of science and useful arts by securing for
limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their
respective writing and discoveries."

History records that little was done in government support of
the arts until the great Depression with the establishment of the
Works Progress Administration (WPA). Between 1859 and 1965 there
were several attempts for government support of the arts: 1850-
President Buchanan attempted to establish the National Commission of
Fine Arts, but was rebuffed by Congress; 1909-President Theodore
Roosevelt pushed for the Commission of Fine Arts, which was also
ill-fated; 1910-President Taft was successful in creating the
National Commission Fine Arts Act, an organization that funneled
private donations to the government and determined the appropriate
location for each donation. In 1965 the National Endowment for the
Arts was signed into law, creating--for the first time in the
history of this country--a federal agency devoted to the arts and
humanities.

The goal of the National Endowment for the Arts was not to
provide employment for artists per se, but rather to make the arts
more widely available to Americans.

So, today, after twenty-seven years of public support of the
arts with the formation of the NEA in 1965, the Endowment is under
attack. There are those who feel that the NEA should be abolished;
there are those who feel strongly that the arts should not be
supported with public funds at all; then there are those who would
like to restrict the kind of art that is supported with public
funds; (And, once again, the NEA has been thrust into the political arena with Buchanan saying, and I quote: "the NEA is an upholstered playpen for the arts and crafts auxiliary of the liberal East.") Following Buchanan's remarks on February 20, 1992, Frohnmayer, Chairman of the NEA, was ousted by President Bush on February 21, 1992. Then there are those, like myself, who believe very strongly about public support of the arts.

A year from now, in the spring of 1993, the NEA will be up before Congress for reauthorization. Its very survival may well be on the line. The question remains whether we, the believers, can mobilize the forces needed to keep and maintain a federal presence for the arts on the national level.

Somehow I am convinced that there is a large segment of our country's population out there that share in a value system not unlike what many of us stand for....education, the environment, and, of course, the arts....for those committed to public support of the arts, to arts in the schools, and to a comfortable level of acceptance of arts in our society....there must be a voice for the believers.

Drop a line to Quix and let them know how you feel about the pros and cons of public funding support of the arts and how, if you are a believer, we can deliver the message of right-sizing support of the arts.

submitted by

Iona B. Dobbins
Executive Director
RI State Council on the Arts
March 6, 1992