

From Words to Action Do Meetings Matter for Cultural Policy?

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Meetings are big business. Or, in other words, talk is not cheap. An economic impact study by Deloitte & Touche LLP demonstrated that conventions, expositions, and meetings generated \$82 billion in total direct spending in 1994, supporting 1.57 million jobs. (1) Meetings of associations and membership organizations, as opposed to corporate-sponsored events, account for the lion's share of this spending (68 percent). Many of these associations serve the arts and culture.

In a recent paper, Margaret Wyszomirski and Joni Cherbo conclude that there are more than 700 national membership organizations supporting the cultural sector, with a median size of 670 members per group. (2) If each of these associations sponsors an annual meeting that is attended by, say, one third of their membership, or approximately 225 people, then aggregate meeting expenditures per year would top \$157 million. (3) This does not include state, regional, and local meetings of membership organizations. Nor does it include foundation, government, or university sponsored meetings, which might conceivably bring the total to \$200 million. To be conservative, let us say that my estimate is twice as high as the actual total. That would still mean that close to \$100 million are spent every year on meetings designed to advance and support the arts in the United States.

This number is, coincidentally, almost the same as the current annual appropriation for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Scholars, journalists, politicians, and arts leaders take very seriously the public's investment in the Endowment. In fact, since 1990, there have been more than 500 articles in the *New York Times* alone that discuss NEA funding, not to mention the dozens, if not hundreds, of articles and books that have been written about the subject. As far as I can ascertain, Wyszomirski and Cherbo are the only scholars or analysts to even recognize that the associational infrastructure matters to arts and culture, and they have not even begun to tackle the question of whether the meetings that drive these associations have an impact. Maybe such meetings are the glue that holds the sector together; but maybe they are not.

Given the magnitude of these expenditures, I strongly encourage individuals with decision-making authority to think more carefully about their investments in meetings and to ask, "Do meetings matter for advancing and strengthening the arts and culture?" This question motivates an ongoing project - "Meetings that Matter" -- supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts and co-directed by Alberta Arthurs of MEM Associates and me. Meetings, of course, can matter in many ways, including creating forums to exchange information, establishing and reinforcing networks, and pursuing policy, program, or

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research goals. Although other meeting outcomes are equally deserving of research and analysis, our investigation focuses on the latter – the pursuit of what might loosely be called cultural policy. Do existing meetings serve to identify pressing cultural needs, discover ways to address these needs, and advance or change practice and policy? How might meetings and convenings be improved? What resources might be invested to link meetings more directly with purposeful action? What configuration of existing meetings and potential meetings might contribute to a more coherent and integrated field of cultural policy? This essay discusses how we approached these questions, lays out some preliminary results, and offers a few tentative suggestions for how to use meetings more effectively to advance policy for the arts and culture.

Meetings of cultural and arts practitioners and scholars come in all shapes and sizes, and as mentioned above, number in the hundreds each year. For the purposes of this research, we are examining convenings that fit into three broad categories -- annual meetings of national arts service and membership organizations, academic conferences, and foundation-supported, special-issue convenings. We are not studying intra-organizational meetings (e.g., board meetings) or government-sponsored meetings (e.g., hearings or legislative committees). Definitions of cultural policy – the object of our inquiry -- are equally diverse. For our purposes, cultural policy represents the decisions (by both public and private entities) that either directly or indirectly **shape the environment** in which the arts get created, disseminated, and consumed.

We began our research by asking who else has studied the political or policy consequences of meetings. Surprisingly, given that meetings and conventions represent a larger proportion of the Gross National Product than the publishing industry and only slightly smaller than legal services, we found only a handful of books and articles that investigate their impact – and these studies focused narrowly on Presidential commissions and higher education reform commissions. Undeterred, I contacted John Kingdon, author of *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, a seminal text on the process of policy-making, and asked for guidance. “You stump me here,” he wrote. “Deliberation about policy choices is of course important, and deliberations occur all the time...I just never thought of ‘formal meetings’ as a separate category of analysis.” With little existing research to build upon, we were forced to invent our own questions, theories, and methods.

As a first step, we have begun to assemble case studies of past meetings, in a variety of fields, that seem to have made a difference in changing some aspect of a debate around policy. We are surveying foundation officers, examining congressional testimony, and asking experts in specific subjects to help identify “meetings” that have mattered. One example is the 1994 Rockefeller-funded meeting at its retreat center in Bellagio that brought together scientists, public health officials, and leaders from the pharmaceutical industry and from non-governmental organizations to discuss how to move forward with AIDS vaccination research. Prior to that meeting, support for such research was politically untouchable. The meeting led to the development of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, whose program of research, advocacy, and policy development has put AIDS vaccines on the global policy agenda. Similarly, a meeting held by the Pew Charitable Trusts in 1994 led to the formation of a new coalition of local and regional

environmental groups, the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition – which has effectively worked to stop clear-cutting, protect roadless areas, and conserve old growth in the National Forests. We will continue to assemble such examples – especially foundation-supported meetings – in order to draw conclusions about why these meetings made a difference. Was it the participants, the timing, the follow-up, the conference report, the publicity, or some combination of these factors? Most readers will have their own examples – from both the cultural sector and other policy domains. We encourage you to share them with us.

Another aspect of our study is the analysis of content in program books for the annual meetings of eight national arts service associations over ten years. We are examining the title, description, and speakers for each panel, plenary address, and break-out session to see 1) how often policy issues appear on the agenda, 2) the nature and diversity of the panelists and speakers, 3) and the extent to which policy topics either overlap conferences or fields or are specific to one or another (and how this changes through time). In addition to this bird-eye view of policy-relevant concerns across disciplines and over time, we are also studying, in detail, the outcomes of a single meeting. At the conclusion of pARTicipate 2001, the joint summer meeting of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies and Americans for the Arts, we conducted exit interviews with forty participants to determine what they learned and, more importantly, what strategies and actions they planned to undertake as a result of having attended the meeting. We are getting encouraging, if somewhat surprising, results; including that, on average, respondents were planning no fewer than *thirty different activities each* (from circulating information, to starting a new program, organizing a special meeting, contacting an elected official, and forming a new partnership). We are now following up with these participants to determine what they actually accomplished in the interim and to ascertain possible barriers to action.

Finally, we have attended twenty meetings over the past eighteen months – ranging from annual conferences of national service organizations to academic and special interest meetings. (4) As “policy ethnographers,” we pay careful attention to how each community or artistic discipline understands cultural policy, how they frame their concerns, and the extent to which they are able to move conversations up the “policy ladder” -- a framework that we use to analyze and categorize the various policy-relevant comments. (See figure 1). Essentially, comments can be classified into any of ten different stages or “rungs” – from simply recognizing important trends, to thinking strategically, identifying problems, suggesting solutions, recognizing policy windows (opportunities to affect policy), building consensus or setting priorities, creating an action plan, and, finally, enacting, implementing, and evaluating a policy. This is, of course, only one way to characterize the policy making process, but it is useful for the purposes of this research.

To date, we have classified the comments of panelists, speakers, and audience members from ten of the twenty meetings in our sample. Preliminary results suggest that participants generally remain on the first three rungs of the ladder (trends, strategic thinking, and problem identification). Of the 400 comments that have been classified thus far, 73 percent, or 291 comments, fall into these three categories (87 comments have

been designated as describing trends, 127 as strategic thinking, and 77 as identifying problems). The next “rung” on the ladder – where participants actually propose a possible policy alternative or solution – receives 54 mentions (or 13 percent). Still fewer comments make it to “identifying policy opportunities or windows” (32 comments) and almost no comments or discussions reach the point of consensus building (setting priorities), action plans, or evaluation and re-design of existing policies.

These findings suggest that we in the arts and culture community are much better at recognizing how our field is changing (trends), what the changes mean for our work (strategic thinking), and what problems result from the changes (identifying problems), than at suggesting specific solutions or outlining plans to address the problems. From a distance, it might seem that we more readily embrace a “culture of complaint” than an “attitude of activism.” The proverbial cup seems half empty.

This, of course, is not an entirely fair representation. First, the results above are drawn primarily from large, annual meetings of national service organizations, where it is less likely than in small, targeted meetings that conversations will move up the ladder from problems to solutions. Furthermore, moving up the ladder is not necessarily a move from complaint to activism, but rather from broad discussion to specific thinking. It is much easier for people to talk about policy in general terms than to suggest specific alternatives or opportunities for action. Participants may not have the disposition, or experience, to look for opportunities to affect policy, to recognize barriers to changing policy, or to suggest alternatives for field-wide action.

Does it matter, from a policy perspective, that most of the arts and culture meetings we analyzed serve principally to air grievances, share concerns, and raise broad questions about the role of the arts in society? In many ways, the meetings (especially the annual conferences) resemble Southern-style tent revivals – where “believers” come together to find mutual affirmation and seek the deeper meanings in their work and in the world they serve. This is surely an important consequence. But, without sacrificing these often intangible benefits, can we, at the same time, consider ways to use our meetings to design policy alternatives, identify opportunities in the political landscape, debate and deliberate priorities, build consensus, and mobilize constituents?

It is important to acknowledge that policy making and problem solving take place at several levels. (5) We might imagine placing the “policy ladder” against three different structures – a cottage, a condominium, and a high rise. By “cottage” I mean to encompass the problems and decisions that can be made by the staff and leadership within an organization (how to stabilize revenues, train better volunteers, develop board leadership). With “condominium” I include concerns that can not be addressed by a single institution or organization – that is, problems that are essentially community-wide (e.g., strengthening the arts in schools, influencing city-planning, increasing local public spending on the arts). In the condominium, policy making or problem solving typically involves collective action (i.e., any single resident can not unilaterally decide to redecorate the lobby or change the landscaping). The associational meetings we attended generally do a good job of providing participants with the tools needed to fix

the roof over their own cottage, but they are less successful at helping their constituents work together as effective problem solvers in political and community contexts.

Finally, some problems or policies belong in the “high rise,” typically on a national level, such as federal appropriations, regulation, legislation, litigation, and rule making, as well as policies promulgated by national organizations themselves, such as new codes of conduct or new national grant programs. For the most part, high-rise decisions are made by the owners of the building, not the residents. In other words, this is an elite arena of policy making, where leaders of national organizations, and some foundation officers, participate in lobbying, building coalitions, testifying, gathering information, and designing programs. Currently, the meetings of national arts service associations are not designed primarily to advance this type of policy, although they can serve leaders of these groups by providing important information about activities in the field.

Let me tentatively suggest two actions through which meeting organizers (and their supporters) might better harness the power of their meetings. First, we might address the fact that, to date, we simply have not had a reliable mechanism to capture and sort policy topics that bubble up throughout an annual meeting or a smaller conference. By using the methodology described above to classify and categorize comments we may be able to gauge the policy dimensions of a conference session. This might help organizers recognize salient points, common concerns, potential alternatives, and windows of opportunity for future action. More importantly, such information gathering techniques might help association leaders better recognize where, along the policy ladder, certain issues fall, which are ripe for action, and which require more deliberate conversations before moving forward.

Second, even if we are able to capture better what transpires at meetings, thus sharpening and identifying policy concerns and articulating next steps, we have no mechanism to move these findings up the policy ladder. I suggest that smaller, carefully timed meetings around specific policy opportunities can serve this role. We have begun to test this premise with a series of meetings called “policy thrusts” – where twenty to twenty-five scholars, practitioners, and policy makers come together around a particular issue to discuss what’s known, what’s needed, and what’s next. To date, with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, we have organized two such “thrusts” around the topic of historic preservation, research, and policy. The meetings have helped to crystallize a plan and to formulate specific strategies to strengthen preservation efforts at the local, regional, and federal levels. More importantly, the thrusts have brought together policy makers and scholars from different parts of a relatively fragmented field, some of whom had never met, allowing them to forge partnerships, build trust, and work toward common solutions.

We have found that this type of “follow-up” meeting is just what has been asked for by leaders of the groups and associations we are studying. During an informal discussion, one association president remarked, “We know what our issues are and we have a good idea of what we need to do about them. What we don’t have are the flexible resources to bring together the right people at the right time to push our agenda forward.” For the sake of further discussion, let me suggest that the arts and culture field would benefit

from a “cultural policy convening authority” -- an independent body that can help fund small gatherings designed to move from strategy and problem identification to consensus building, action plans, and policy enactment. This convening authority might, itself, organize a few select meetings, commissions, or task forces around concerns that have no natural institutional base (that is, the future of mid-size arts organizations, or art and access in rural America). Such an authority might partner with government officials to organize independent commissions or study groups to inform the cultural work and policies of local, state, and federal agencies. And, such a convening instrument might establish a grant program to enable arts service organizations and other nonprofits to design policy “thrusts” around concerns they feel are ripe for intervention.

In the book, *A Trial by Jury*, (2001) historian D. Graham Burnett writes about his experience as the foreman of the jury in a murder trial in New York City. Throughout most of the sixty-six hours of deliberation, Burnett struggled with the process of coming to a verdict. In the book, he ruminates, "I realize now that for me – a humanist, an academic, a poetaster – the primary aim of sustained thinking and talking had always been, in a way, more thinking and talking. Cycles of reading, interpreting, and discussing were always exactly that: cycles. One never 'solved' a poem, one read it, and then read it again – each reading emerging from earlier efforts and preparing the mind for future readings." Jurors, of course, don't have this luxury and their duty demands an awesome finality. For the purposes of policy, perhaps we need to think of ourselves more as jurors than as scholars and artists, and our policy concerns more as trials than as poems. Then we can design our meetings to solve problems, not just recite them.

Notes

1. Rog, S. and R. Wolffe. 1994. “Economic Impact Study.” Washington, D.C.: Convention Liaison Council.
2. Wyszomirski, M. and J. Cherbo. 2001. “Mapping the Associational Infrastructure of the Arts and Culture Sector: A Research Report to the Ford Foundation.” April 2001. Arts Policy and Administration Program, The Ohio State University.
3. Assuming that the average cost of attending a conference – including room, board, travel, and conference fees – is \$1,000.
4. The “we” used throughout this article refers to me, my research associate, Stephanie Hinton, and Alberta Arthurs, principal at MEM associates.
5. Special thanks to Stan Katz for his suggestion to clarify and distinguish between different levels of policy making.

Figure 1: The policy ladder and immigrant artists: an example of a community-level discussion.

	Stages	Description	Examples
1	Trend	Participants call attention to broad, field-wide trends	“There are a growing number of immigrants in our community, many of whom bring with them very rich artistic traditions”
2	Strategic Thinking	Participants ask general questions about how to change the environment in which they work and how to influence broad trends	“We need to do a better job of building bridges to new immigrant communities – and the arts are an effective way to do so.”
3	Problem Identification	Participants raise a field-wide, or community-wide problem or grievance.	“Immigrant artists are not adequately supported in most communities. They do not have access to existing sources of funding, both because of the language barrier and because existing grant categories don’t recognize immigrant art forms.”
4	Policy Solutions	Participants suggest specific policy alternatives that address problems or flesh out a recommended strategy.	“Arts organizations, grantmakers and local human service providers should supply technical assistance to help immigrant artists apply for grants and gain access to community resources. And, the arts community should work with local universities to identify experts who can help evaluate and interpret unfamiliar immigrant art forms.”
5	Policy Windows and Barriers	Participants identify specific opportunities (or barriers) for policy action – new legislation, rule making, an important meeting or summit, the release of a report, a press conference – where a proposed alternative might find leverage or gain visibility/credibility.	“Our mayor has just created a taskforce on immigrant affairs (TIA). Support structures for immigrant artists should be high on their agenda.” Or, “The state has just implemented a new curriculum guideline emphasizing multi-cultural education – this is a good opportunity to connect immigrant artists with the schools.”
6	Consensus Building/Priority Setting	Participants attempt to narrow in on a particular policy alternative or set priorities for action.	“Rather than push for new appropriations or grants, we should focus on technical assistance and other strategies to help these artists tap into existing resources”
7	Action Plan – Assigning Responsibilities	Participants begin to outline the necessary steps to get a policy solution onto the agenda of a decision-making body and/or enacted or implemented.	A participant agrees to hold a meeting to bring together local arts leaders and residents of immigrant communities to discuss the cultural needs of these groups. Another participant agrees to contact the new chair of the TIA.
8	Policy Enactment	Policy advocates are successful at getting a proposed solution funded, enacted into law, or otherwise embedded into policy.	A meeting is held of arts leaders and immigrant artists. A technical assistance program is designed by a coalition of local organizations.
9	Policy Implementation	Stakeholders put into practice the approved program, project or policy.	The technical assistance program is implemented. Immigrant artists successfully apply for grants. Several exhibitions and performances take place.
10	Evaluation and Re-design	Principals and stakeholders seek to evaluate the success of a new policy and make decisions about its future direction	Members of the TIA meet to discuss whether the technical assistant program was successful. They discuss other barriers to fully integrating immigrant arts into the community.