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Small Organizations in the Folk and Traditional Arts: Strategies for Support

**Based on a gathering convened by the Fund for Folk Culture
in Santa Fe, June 19-20, 2003**

**by Shalom Staub
Academic Affairs Fellow, Dickinson College
(Based on a meeting summary prepared by Elaine Thatcher, Heritage Arts
Services)**

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Introduction

This report addresses two critical challenges in the field of arts/culture—the growing recognition of the vital role played by “small” organizations in community life and the increasing awareness that the current policies and agencies which offer support to the country’s cultural infrastructure do not successfully mobilize this grassroots resource. In June 2003, the Fund for Folk Culture convened a gathering of individuals from across the U.S. to explore issues relating to small cultural organizations, specifically in the folk and traditional arts field. Participants included representatives from small cultural organizations working in various cultural traditions, professionally-staffed non-profits, urban and rural arts/culture initiatives, state and national funding agencies, individual arts consultants, private foundations, and researchers affiliated with national projects on arts/culture.

In shaping the meeting, the FFC asked participants to consider the following questions:

- What are the resource needs of small organizations?
- What are appropriate mechanisms and types of assistance for small organizations that recognize their essential nature and role in community life without changing them into something they are not?
- What support systems and intermediary networks are required?

This report summarizes responses to these questions and dominant conversational topics at the two-day gathering and provides suggestions for future assistance and support. A fuller meeting summary is available on the FFC’s website (www.folkculture.org/aboutourwork/convenings).

Relevant Cultural Policy Research

In the past few years, FFC research on private funding opportunities for the folk and traditional arts, commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts, found that a majority of organizations engaged in programs or services involving folk arts and traditional culture have annual budgets hovering near \$100,000 or below. Many (though not all) are unincorporated, and run on a volunteer basis. These and other observations are contributing to a growing body of cultural policy literature that is expanding our knowledge about the range and presence of cultural participation in neighborhoods and communities around the country and the organizations and systems that make this participation possible.

Two recent studies—*The Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places* and *Culture Counts in Communities: A Framework for Measurement*—address specifically the multiple roles, meanings and dynamics of the unincorporated or voluntary sector in a broader context of national cultural life. To frame this meeting’s discussion, the FFC invited two of the authors associated with both studies—Alaka Wali (*The Informal Arts*) and Maria-Rosario Jackson (*Culture Counts in Communities*)—to make presentations about their respective research. (see notes at end of article)

In both cases, the research provides evidence of the role of the small, informally structured organizations in creating social capital—by contributing to individual and group identity, creating opportunities for life-long-learning, building civic engagement and strengthening communities. Particular attention has been paid to such key concepts as *presence, participation, impact, and systems of support*—as encompassing a greater variety of activities culturally meaningful in specific communities, being participation-centered, small organization-based, not limited to a formal organizational infrastructure, and concerned with social value.

This field-based research has implications for the policies and practices of those public and private agencies which seek to support community-based arts and cultural activity. Bureaucratic efficiency may lean towards “one-size-fits-all” policies and practices, but experience and data show that funding entities which adopt flexible approaches in their relationships with organizations operating at varying scales of formality will have greater success in engaging broader segments of a community, whether at the local, state or national level.

Defining Success and Capacity Building for Small Cultural Organizations

Grappling with notions of success first required participants to identify salient characteristics of small cultural organizations as well as the unique challenges or perceptual barriers they face in charting their own development. Presentations at the Gathering by representatives of small cultural organizations, and conversations among the broad range of participants repeatedly conveyed the following observations and issues:

- **Small organizations need to be understood in their own terms**, not as “not-yet-big” organizations. Virtually all participants have experienced the implicit and widely held expectation that getting bigger is better, that the organization must apply for grants, that the budget has to grow in order to achieve success, that applying for 501(c)(3) status is a given, and that the organization needs a board. Ironically, the field of public folklore—the network of professional folklorists who are in the forefront of supporting community-based folk cultural activities—developed principally in the context of state arts funding agencies, and in this institutional environment, the field has put significant energy into creating ways to fund folk cultural activities. This emphasis on administering

grant programs and moving small organizations into a grant-eligible mode may obscure other needs and strategies for support.

- **Grass-roots cultural organizations often operate outside, or in contrast to, the “mainstream” arts and culture world of organizations and funders.** Many cultural organizations come into being specifically because their needs are ignored by existing mainstream organizations. Politics and power relations play out explicitly or implicitly within these sets of relationships. Activities in the informal sector, and folk cultural activity specifically, often challenge the dominant paradigms and ideas about definitions of art, artistic quality and value, and accepted forms of cultural participation.
- **Small organizations operate within the broader ecology of cultural organizations in any given community.** Some may be isolated, but others interact extensively within this broad network of arts, cultural, and community organizations (including for-profit and not-for-profit systems). State-wide, regional or local “established” organizations can (and do) play a vital role in creating a support system for the “informal” cultural sector. Sustaining this web of relationships is critical to making information and other resources accessible.
- **All organizations experience a life cycle with key transition stages; the span of this life cycle may be more pronounced or condensed in small organizations.** In the time span of 1-2, 3-5, or 5-10 years, small organizations can mobilize significant community support and creativity in dynamic and fluid ways, and produce meaningful impact without the benefit of a strategic plan or the development of an endowment fund. In fact, the formal structures associated with larger organizations may well be counter-productive to success. In this regard, it may be more fruitful to consider the development of some

small organizations through the prism of social movements rather than business models of organizational development.

Strategies for Creating Support for Small Organizations in the Folk Culture Field

Because small organizations move along diverse development paths and at differing rates of growth, the strategies for creating support will vary. In this vein, one participant suggested making the distinction between small and “smaller” organizations. For instance, support strategies for those organizations moving along the path to 501(c)(3) status are well developed, but effective support for smaller, more informal organizations needs further attention. The following issues and ideas were prominent in the conversations at the Gathering and emphasized ways to create access to information, expertise, funding and space. The goals are to create greater self-sufficiency and enhance the mobilization of the grassroots social and cultural capital represented by small cultural organizations. *Key strategies were those related to aggregating resources and connecting or networking mechanisms.* The suggestions below are partly observation based on experience and partly specific examples. For readers interested in more information, a list of specific programs or organizations cited as examples here are listed at the end of this paper.

- **Strategies for Aggregating Resources**

-Developing networked systems of support for small organizations or among small organizations. Some funders and intermediaries have creatively assisted small organizations by supporting coalitions or consortia to share resources and mobilize collective action, or by identifying established agencies to act as sponsors, such as a church or library for particular programs.

-Developing “service hubs”—which build on the value of the network of relationships. A particular organization may develop expertise or resources in a particular area, and then position itself to provide those resources to other organizations whether on a barter basis or for a fee.

-Developing “incubator” models, borrowed from micro-enterprise and business development. In this model, multiple organizations can be assisted along a growth trajectory through business training and the development of organizational infrastructure. The City of San Jose’s Office of Cultural Affairs, for instance, operates a Multicultural Arts Incubator Program that provides work space, business and marketing training, and access to performance space and opportunity. Groups apply for entry and receive multi-year assistance. Community Partners, based in Los Angeles, provides non-profit incubator services to community-based social entrepreneurs and organizations (including cultural organizations) in southern California. The International Institute of New Jersey operated a two-year pilot project providing non-profit incubation for six immigrant cultural organizations.

- **Strategies of Connection**

-Developing peer to peer connectivity among small organizations. Creating opportunities for informal organizations to interact together, learn from one another, identify shared needs and pool resources. By doing this, multiple groups have the opportunity to seek resources with a common voice. This dimension of the discussion addressed the potential for positive social change by doing what Dr. Wali has documented in Chicago’s informal sector—developing “bridging” social capital by

bringing people together across the social identity-based differences that permeate our society.

-Developing connectivity across the informal-to-formal organizational spectrum. For example, the Institute for Cultural Partnerships and the Pennsylvania Council for the Arts administer a statewide folk arts infrastructure project funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. One component of the project is a mini-grant program focusing on linking an established cultural or community organization in a region of the state that doesn't have formal folk arts organizations with the informal folk arts activities of that region. A local historical society, museum or church might be able to provide space to a group of local folk artists, or exhibit the artists' work, or sponsor an apprenticeship for a master artist. By encouraging large or medium-sized organizations—which tend to do their “outreach” in a random fashion—to target informal cultural organizations for partnerships, one builds connectivity and creates the conditions for self-sufficiency. Although large organizations often don't see the mutual benefit, they gain access to new audiences out of this kind of partnership. Giving incentives for these kinds of collaborations could be a good strategy of support for small organizations.

-Developing opportunities for small organizations to contribute to the dialogue about defining full and meaningful support. Ensuring representation and inclusion on panels, in committees, advisory councils and boards, thereby enabling the perspectives of the grassroots cultural sector to become a greater part of policy development.

- **Strategies of Targeted Funding**

-Developing small grant programs that focus on development. For example, the Traditional Arts Development Program at the Alliance for California Traditional Arts

offers grants of up to \$1,500 to small organizations and individuals for a range of professional, marketing and artistic development needs. The main question on the application is “What do you need to advance your art or organization to the next level?”

-Developing small grant programs that build capacity. Small cultural organizations often need access to resources to build capacity, such as producing quality recordings, curriculum development, setting up an archives, training teachers in utilizing traditional arts as a resource in the curriculum, and developing promotional materials for artists’ work. The New York Folklore Society and others have developed mentoring programs and support for peer mentoring exchange that emphasize professional and artistic development needs.

-Developing programs that provide access to space. Affordable rehearsal or rental space continues to be a challenge for many small cultural organizations, including folk cultural organizations. Subsidies to centers providing space is one such strategy. Others include lottery systems or voucher programs which allow small cultural organizations some measure of choice and control.

Concluding Observations on Strategies. All of these strategies underscore two simple points. Financial support may be vital, and in some cases, even small amounts of money are enough to make a huge difference for the support of significant folk cultural activities. It was clear, however, from comments by representatives of small organizations and service providers present that financial support coupled with assistance and other resources is far more effective. The second point—discussed more fully in the section to follow—is the health of the support system or environment for small cultural organizations. The availability of knowledgeable assistance presumes the existence and sustained support for service organizations and other intermediaries.

Envisioning the “Ideal” Program of Support for Small Organizations

Participants in the Gathering were asked to design programs of support for small folk cultural organizations. In break-out sessions, separate groups worked to design ideal programs of support operating at the local, state, and national levels, including specific attention to rural and Native American needs. All the groups found that the challenge of support for small organizations clustered around several core issues: *program focus*, *eligibility*, *the application process*, and *evaluation*, all of which need to be envisioned as part of an interconnected system of support.

A “Systems” View

Support for small organizations requires more than making grants available, whether large or small. Thinking about the vitality of small cultural organizations within their communities requires a “systems” view. Organizations operating at the national, state, regional, and local levels are inextricably linked. Each provides services and resources that ultimately impact local cultural activities.

Small organizations need opportunities to learn about available resources. They also need opportunities to interact with funding agencies to define what resources they need. These dual aspects of communication are critical elements in creating a healthy environment for small organizations. Internet-based communication is one effective vehicle, though nothing will replace the value of face-to-face gatherings, particularly at the local and state levels. National-level funders should support communication/gatherings, and foster opportunities for the field to define the issues moving up from the local to the national levels. Ultimately the national agenda

will need to be broad-based and flexible in order to accommodate the range of needs and experiences at the local level.

There is also a clear role for intermediary organizations which know the field, whether at a national level (such as the Fund for Folk Culture in relation to philanthropy and other national service organizations), or at a local or regional level, where established private non-profit folk cultural organizations frequently function as brokers and service providers among the informal sector of grass-roots cultural organizations. These intermediaries function effectively as conveners, as providers of technical assistance and programmatic and organizational support, as funding conduits (with fiscal oversight), and even as re-granting entities. These critical on-going services, however, are infrequently recognized and often underfunded.

One charge for the funder is to strengthen existing networks and to build new nodes in those networks. Linked to this is the critical need for professional development opportunities for individuals in the small organization sector. Funders can create opportunities for shared learning and collaboration, and can help to broadcast the exciting work that is being done.

A “systems” view also allows the folk culture field, and the funders who seek to invest in it, to see the public value created by folk cultural activities at the local level—economic impact, civic engagement and neighborhood revitalization, to name a few. These become more obscure at state and national levels, but the aggregate of this local work has tremendous national impact.

Program Focus

Funding will always be a need, but in itself, money is not sufficient to support the vitality of the community-based small organization. Programs should also be designed to address capacity building (such as marketing, technology, board development, etc.) and direct program services (or services to be delivered by a “service hub”—such as exhibition or performance

touring, joint marketing efforts, creating an arts “incubator,” etc.). Programs that address the need for tools for self-sufficiency and sustainability would be particularly important, for example, applying the proven strategy for small organizations to implement “credit holder” programs with local banks to establish lines of credit for operating support.

Within the funding arena, it would be useful to create opportunities both for operating support and/or project support (perhaps with different eligibility requirements, as noted below). Multi-year funding is desirable, or at least the possibility of year-to-year funding approvals within the framework of a multi-year project or plan. Flexibility of funding request deadline and project time-frame are important considerations for small organizations as well. Small amounts of money with a simple application process and a quick turn-around in the decision-making are the elements that will allow many small organizations to make the application effort possible.

Eligibility Issues

Funders often limit their programs to 501(c)3 organizations. Many small organizations therefore do not qualify. Alternative strategies are needed to provide financial support to small organizations, perhaps through intermediary organizations if the size of the grant requires a more sophisticated level of fiscal accounting. Consortia or partner-based projects may effectively be used to link formal and informal organizations, within the arts/culture community and between small folk arts/culture organizations with non-cultural sector organizations.

The requirement for 501(c)3 status could be fine-tuned according to the type of support requested. For example, for *operating* support it may be very appropriate to require the 501(c)3 as an indicator of organizational stability, whereas for *project* support it may not be a necessary requirement at all. There may be alternative, but nonetheless acceptable ways for that informal

organization to demonstrate to a funder that it has the appropriate capacity to successfully carry out a particular project.

For those small organizations on a trajectory of growth, funders may offer a multi-tiered eligibility structure. Over time, and with staff guidance, a small organization could be effectively graduated from an “entry” track which provides small grants and significant technical assistance to a more established track with access to more resources.

The Application Process

Simplicity. Many small organizations need only small amounts of money, up to \$5,000. In this funding range, a simple application process is most appropriate—a letter describing project request and scope and a budget demonstrating a significant need. Other grant categories may have other characteristics and requirements, such as the project or operating support grant, or a special initiative grant to take a stable organization to a new level of activity. Small organizations do not necessarily speak “grant” language, and though it is an extra burden on grant-making organizations, the most effective approach would be narrative applications that lead the applicant through the steps of describing the work and its significance by responding to specific questions. Letters of support may be particularly relevant in judging the appropriateness of a small organization’s funding application; evidence of community impact will be most visible to the funder in these letters.

The challenge in some of these recommendations is that the funder will need to allocate more staff resources so that the agency can have a greater presence in the field, with more face-to-face contact among small organizations. Interviews or site visits may prove to be a useful supplement or substitute for extensive application forms. Language is an issue too. Some of the most dynamic local folk cultural work is done in non-English speaking communities; these cultural

organizations need ways to tell their story to funders and a larger community as well. Here is another important role for the “intermediary” organization.

Evaluation

Funders reasonably want to know the impact of their investment. The shift to outcomes-based evaluation may translate well in working with small organizations, where community impact may be particularly evident. The challenge is to develop ways of conducting evaluation that gathers this information effectively, without unduly straining the limited resources of small organizations. Funders may need to create ways to bring small organizations together to explore and learn about evaluation. Peer evaluation may be useful to explore, as it also generates the valuable by-product of increased networking and communication among small organizations facing similar challenges. Evaluation can be conceptualized as creating the opportunity for shared learning—for the small organization, and for the funder. An annual meeting of grantees, or regional meetings of grantees, may be particularly useful ways to promote this learning.

Research, Program Models and Organizations Cited

Note: The following listings provide contact information for relevant research, program models and organizations involving small cultural and folk cultural organizations cited in this paper. This is not intended as an exhaustive or complete list of organizations or programs.

Research

Jackson, Maria-Rosario and Joaquin Herranz. *Culture Counts in Communities: A Framework for Measurement*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2002. This report is part of the Urban Institute's Arts and Culture Indicators in Community Building Project, developed in 1996 in collaboration with the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation.

Wali, Alaka, Rebecca Severson and Mario Longoni. *The Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places*. Chicago: Chicago Center for Arts Policy, Columbia College, Chicago, 2002. This report is based on a two year ethnographic study, with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Illinois Arts Council, the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, the Urban Institute Arts and Culture Indicators in Community Building Project and Columbia College, Chicago.

Program Models and Organizations

Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA)
Traditional Arts Development Program
1245 Van Ness
Fresno, CA 93721
(559) 237-9813/fax (559) 237-9814
Web: www.actaonline.org

Community Partners®
606 South Olive Street, Suite 2400
Los Angeles, CA 90014
Phone: (213) 439-9640 Fax: (213) 439-9650
Web: www.communitypartners.org

Institute for Cultural Partnerships
3211 N. Front St., Suite 104
Harrisburg, PA 17110
(717) 238-1770/ fax (717) 238-3336
Web: www.culturalpartnerships.org

New York Folklore Society
Mentoring and Professional Development Program
P.O. Box 764
Schenectady, NY 12301
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Web: www@nyfolklore.org

City of San José, Office of Cultural Affairs
San José Arts Incubator Program
4 North Second Street, Suite 450
San José, CA 95113
(408) 277-2790/fax (408) 277-3160
Web: www.sanjosearts.com