Community Engagement in American Cultural Policy

Patricia Dewey, Ph.D. (pdewey@uoregon.edu) -- *Corresponding Author*
Associate Professor and Director, Arts and Administration Program
Director, Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon, USA

Bill Flood, M.A. (bill@billflood.org)
Community Cultural Development Consultant (http://www.billflood.org)
Adjunct Instructor, Arts and Administration Program
University of Oregon
Portland, Oregon, USA

Abstract

In this paper, we argue that the evolving cultural policy system in the United States requires an increasing focus on community relevance and a new emphasis on implementing processes of community engagement.

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American society and American culture(s) are in a constant state of evolution and change. As the population of the United States becomes more ethnically diverse, citizens, cultural sector leaders, and community spokespeople are demanding that cultural services and publicly-funded cultural activities reflect the cultures involved. As a result, American cultural policy is characterized by an increasing focus on community relevance and a new emphasis on implementing processes of community engagement[1]. In this paper, we present a snapshot of current distinguishing aspects and institutions of American cultural policy in a comparative context, discuss evolutionary change in American cultural policy governance systems, and suggest that strategies of community engagement are foundational to contemporary American cultural policy leadership and participation.

Evolutionary Change in American Cultural Policy

Cultural policy in the United States has evolved to be as fragmented, decentralized, multi-layered, and complex as the diverse population it represents. In practice, American cultural policy continues to broaden in scope and deepen in its institutional structures and systems. In contrast to many other nations, America does not have a formal, centralized cultural policy. Rather, cultural policy is often embedded in and defined by various constellations of public policy goals and programs that are often not explicitly designed to affect culture. It is no surprise, then, that efforts to study and understand American cultural policy by international scholars and practitioners often result in considerable difficulty and confusion.

In the United States, cultural policy can be best understood as a collection of policies and programs that involves decisions, actions, and inactions of both public and private actors. These policies and programs involve diverse goals, issues, and constituencies, and may complement or contradict each other. American cultural policy reflects a national culture that values pragmatism and instrumentalism (Wyszomirski, 2008). A mixed system of both private and public support for culture and the arts has long existed in America, strongly supported by formal tax laws and policies that encourage a culture of individual philanthropy. In addition, while the "high arts" continue to be valued, American cultural policy has evolved to also encompass closely-related entertainment, heritage, design, and unincorporated arts sectors. Increasingly, as the American economy is recognized as being knowledge-based and creativity-driven, public policies that support a creative economy, creative cities, and creative industries both directly and indirectly impact the arts and culture sector. The arts are viewed as central to the creative sector, which has been mapped by Cherbo, Vogel, and Wyszomirski (2008) to comprise the creative workforce along with seven distinct cultural industry clusters, supported by three integral infrastructure systems. The core of the *creative sector* (often used interchangeably with the term *cultural sector*) is now seen to collectively encompass areas as diverse as visual arts and crafts, architecture and design, literary publishing, cultural and entertainment industries, museums and heritage, performing arts, and informal arts.

This evolving conceptualization of "the arts" in America as being part of a much larger creative (or cultural) sector has led to a much broader scope of policies, institutions, actors,

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[1] *Community relevance* is demonstrated through services and programs that are specifically requested by and/or in direct response to the interests of community members. *Community engagement* is seen through outreach and participation strategies that seek to deepen involvement of community members in cultural programs and services.

and programs that are now considered important to understanding American cultural policy. Engaging in American cultural policy requires the ability to identify members of the specific cultural policy subsystem of interest, who often take the form of an issue network – a community – engaged in advocating for certain support streams for the interest area. Structures and processes of cultural policy engagement are now largely issue-driven, as communities form and networks engage in multi-level network governance systems (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). The increasing complexity involved in evolving models of network governance require a finely-tuned focus on processes of interaction within each issue-based community.

Concepts of knowledge-based policy communities and interest-based policies networks are particularly beneficial in navigating the American cultural policy labyrinth. As Howlett and Ramesh (1995, chap. 6) explain, the earliest such concept, the *iron triangle*, was based on the observation in the mid-twentieth century that interest groups, congressional committees, and government agencies in the United States mutually supported each other in legislative and regulatory matters. A more flexible concept of a policy subsystem evolved in the 1960s and 1970s, coined the *issue network* by Hugh Heclo (1978). According to Heclo, issue networks were paired with iron triangles, but allow for participants to move in and out of the policy subsystem as they seek to influence public policy. In the 1980s and 1990s, a more complex framework for studying the activities of policy actors in policy subsystems was put forward by Paul Sebatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith (1993), termed the *advocacy coalition*. "Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier argue that an advocacy coalition includes both state and societal actors at the national, sub-national, and local levels of government. . . The actors come together for reasons of common beliefs. . . . The core of their belief system, consisting of views on the nature of human-kind and some desired state of affairs, is quite stable and holds the coalition together. All those in an advocacy coalition participate in the policy process in order to use the government machinery to pursue their (self-serving) goals" (Howlett & Ramesh, 1995, pp. 126-127). Additional concepts referred to as *policy networks* (which are issue-based) and *policy communities* (which is seen to be more inclusive) also emerged in the late twentieth-century and remain relevant today. Wilkes and Wright (1987) distinguish these terms by suggesting that a *policy community* "identifies those actors and potential actors drawn from the policy universe who share a common policy focus. Network is the linking process within a policy community or between two or more communities" (p. 298).

In the United States, the cultural policy arena "is broadening to encompass the high, popular, and unincorporated arts, whether nonprofit or commercial, and deepening to include a number of issues that touch upon the activities of many arts disciplines and are invested in many federal departments and agencies and levels of government" (Cherbo & Wyszomirski, 2000, p. 13). In the American cultural policy system, we have evolved from being a federally-driven arts funding issue network to being a highly complex creative sector policy community. The work of federal agencies, such as the National Endowment for the Arts, is inextricably intertwined with the efforts of state and local arts councils and agencies, private foundations sometimes serving multiple states, as well as a growing prevalence of local cultural planning policy initiatives[2]. With the cultural policy system moving toward more fluid, flexible, and localized community engagement around specific issue areas, the field requires structures and processes of multi-level and network governance. Strategies and tools for planning and managing community engagement within the American cultural policy system have become imperative.

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[2] Detailed current funding information for all levels of public arts councils and agencies can be most easily found on the Americans for the Arts website www.americansforthearts.org

Strategies for Building Community Relevance and Community Engagement

As many scholars observe in recent publications, American cultural policy includes building communities and enhancing participation (Borwick, 2012; Borrup, 2006; Cherbo, Stewart, & Wyszomirski, 2008; Grams & Farrell, 2008; Ivey, 2008; Tepper & Ivey, 2008). It is necessary but not sufficient to have effective policies and structures to advance cultural policy. Cultural policy communities and networks increasingly require strategies, approaches, and instruments of cultural policy engagement. Bottom-up processes of engagement are as important as top-down institutions and processes. Further, as public and private funders are recognizing the need to support more diverse cultural organizations' work that is especially relevant to specific communities, some non-profit professional "high arts" organizations are threatened by a prospective loss of resources and others are eagerly embracing the opportunity to deepen and expand their audiences. Professional community-based cultural policy facilitators are being called on to assist specific ethnic groups, neighborhoods, cultural sector organizations, and community leaders in transitioning to a much broader understanding of what is encompassed within American cultural policy and its diverse programmatic support mechanisms. Local cultural planning processes often serve as important mechanisms for clarifying goals and strategies around community engagement.

So, what do community relevance and community engagement mean within the American cultural policy system? These concepts both refer to relationship development. Strategies of enhancing community relevance and community engagement in the cultural arena involve skills in knowing the right methods in various contexts for listening to what people value, bringing people together around key issues, and offering people multiple avenues of participation. Community engagement can be initiated by a large institution or a grassroots group, but must be collaborative and reciprocal in generating a feeling of mutual listening and action. Partnerships and collaborations with other arts/cultural organizations, and sometimes non-arts/cultural organizations, are often key to successful community engagement. Ultimately, community relevance means that the actions, strategies, programs and services (the output) resulting from cultural policies being enacted will have value and meaning to the people affected.

Approaches to community engagement assume that citizens wish to be involved in their communities and are willing to make an effort to do so. Since the founding of the nation, Americans have fostered a culture of civic engagement and volunteerism, reflecting the American value that individual participation in civic life builds democracy and community life. Cultural participation is an important avenue of broader civic engagement. It is important to recognize, however, that many ethnic groups more recently immigrating to the United States have a completely different notion of community involvement/civic engagement, which require modified strategies and approaches to encourage cultural participation and the development of locally-relevant cultural policies. It is also important to acknowledge that, for many persons who struggle financially to support their families, community engagement is seen as a luxury that they cannot afford. Thus, "access" and "equity" become significant issues within cultural policy making.

Skilled facilitators recognize that there is no template for good community engagement; rather, one must recognize that the process will differ in every culture and in every location. Preparatory work involves developing an understanding of how each specific community works – including knowledge of the history of the community, ways of communication, and understanding its strengths, resources, opportunities, and challenges. Processes of listening are different in each setting, and developing skills in active listening are crucial. Expert facilitators ask questions and invite input, then listen based on a sincere interest to understand, better engage and serve. Generally, these discussions begin with knowing what is important to the people involved (for example, arts opportunities in schools, resources for traditional or individual artists, the need for community gathering spaces), bringing these items to the table

for discussion, then openly addressing and revealing what is really important to the community. When involved in these discussions, one must carefully consider "excellence" as defined by the participating cultures – not just by outside others who are curating taste. Similarly, the discussion must avoid jargon or acronyms and use the languages of the people involved. The facilitator must understand feasibility of the discussed goals and action steps given existing resources, opportunities, and challenges. Ideally, the facilitator will help create a sense of hope and an articulated collective future without offering something that is not possible. In the same way, organizations must carefully understand their missions and seek to partner with other groups and organizations that can complement that mission without pulling the organization too far from its core/mission. When successful, processes of community engagement will result in exciting and powerful participatory outcomes.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the evolving cultural policy system in the United States requires an increasing focus on community relevance and a new emphasis on implementing processes of community engagement. The strengths of this approach lie in the opportunity to engage more broadly and deeply our citizenry through culture, and to build cultural organizations whose services are deeply connected with the cultures and desires of the citizenry.

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