

## **Interview, Document, Observe, and Clarify (I-DOC)**

*A project to assess the ideas and outcomes of the*

*National Performing Arts Convention*

*June 8-13, 2004, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

*Project Principals*

*Alberta Arthurs, Steven J. Tepper, Andrew Taylor*

*Project Management & Support*

*Jennifer L. Novak, Research Assistant / Jodi Beznoska, Project Manager*

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### ***Pre-Convention Survey***

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1. Extrapolating from the interviewees in the pre-convention survey, NPAC attendees were staff members of arts organizations (fewer were board members, volunteers, consultants, etc.) from small, medium and large organizations. Almost all of them had college educations; half had masters' degrees; most had extensive experience in the field. More than half had attended their association conferences on a regular or occasional basis; a quarter of them were attending for the first time. (The fact that so many were first time attendees may suggest that the size and special nature of the NPAC were attractive.)
2. Institutional issues of most concern to these interviewees were funding, fund raising and audience development. Organizational mission/capacity were also significant concerns. The issues that concerned these professionals for the field as a whole were similar, with arts education replacing organizational mission/capacity.
3. Asked to rank the factors important to the success of their institutions, interviewees cited internal management and board leadership as first order concerns. The actions of governments ranked very low as factors for them; private giving was also not a major factor. The finding suggests that arts professionals expect success to come from their own institutional efforts.
4. A very sizable majority of the interviewees (62%) were optimistic that their organizations can successfully resolve the key challenges they identified. Far fewer (32%) were optimistic about the capacity of the wider field to address its

challenges successfully. Again, this finding suggests a high level of confidence in institutions and in institutional efforts.

5. Asked about needed changes, possible solutions for problems in their institutions, respondents gave answers consistent with their earlier answers; organizational leadership and fundraising were named as the most important factors for success. For the field more broadly, a variety of responses suggested the need for better communication of the value of the arts to society and the need for better coordination across the field.
6. Interviewees were asked to describe the outcomes they expected from the Convention. More than half said that they expected a bigger, more exciting Convention, with a national perspective. A quarter of them mentioned the cross-fertilization of ideas across disciplines as an expectation. When asked how they expected this Convention to differ from the usual annual meetings of their associations, they responded that typically they expect networking and general learning and exposure to new ideas in their fields to result from those meetings; they clearly expected this meeting to go beyond such results. Three quarters of them did say, however, that they typically expect to gain useful ideas and information from their meetings, and that they expected this at the NPAC as well.
7. In their own words, in response to open ended questions, the interviewees stressed national prominence and promise for the arts as a desired outcome of the NPAC. Their words suggested hopefulness that the Convention would inspire coherence, a sense of calling, a shared agenda and set of purposes for the field.
8. Putting all of these answers together, it seems clear that attendees expected the usual results of peer convening from the Pittsburgh meeting. Typically they find their meetings useful in networking, in learning, and in inspiration for their institutional goals. These professionals have confidence and pride in their institutions, and expect to be buoyed and helped by convening with their colleagues in the arts. Beyond the usual, however, these interview responses suggest a high level of aspiration for national topics and national goals in Pittsburgh, a level of national communication and concern not typical in their meetings. This aspiration is particularly notable because the pre-convention survey also shows considerable pessimism about the field and a concern that new approaches and answers are needed to improve the future of the arts overall in the nation.

## ***Findings from the Convention***

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1. In the 125 sessions of the Convention that were observed and coded by the I-DOC team, more than half of the speakers were non-profit arts professionals identified with arts institutions. Overall, 84% of the speakers and presenters were from the arts; 16% were from other fields. Institutional and national interests prevailed; there were very few speakers representing state, regional or international concerns. In short, the expertise and interests offered at sessions mirrored almost precisely the expertise and interests of the Convention participants and the sponsoring service organizations. Convention organizers may want to think about the implications of these facts in future planning.
2. Categorizing topics in the Convention sessions revealed that most conversations were about art making, artists and arts practices. The second most significant topics related to management and governance of arts institutions, and the third was audience development. Given the weight given to the importance of funding, fund raising and management in the pre-Convention interviews, this focus surprises. At least two possible explanations merit further study. First, the subjects chosen for the sessions by the organizers may reflect interests different from those on the minds of participants. (It was observable, for instance, that there were very few sessions scheduled on fund raising, and those that were scheduled tended to be reports from funders rather than issue discussions across the field). Second, it is observable from the data collected that management and marketing issues, and other subjects, were raised in relation to the making of art in these sessions. It is possible that professionals prefer considering practical issues in the context of art making, their chief occupation. These data and observations should be considered further when sessions are planned for future conferences.
3. Given what was learned about session presenters, the “level” of conversation in the sessions was not surprising. Most of the discussion at the NPAC (45%) was at the level of individual organizations, reflecting the speaker profile. The national level was the second most frequent at 27%. International and regional conversations were uncommon.
4. 62 % of the sessions identified clear problems or barriers, and most of them focused on solutions or possible solutions to those problems. This finding is significant, because it suggests that sessions were purposeful and functional. The

most common set of problems discussed related to issues of coordination or communication, both internal – within organizations – and external – across disciplines or to the public. Lack of financial resources and issues related to resources (public support, declining audiences, political climate) were second in importance. Management problems were barely discussed compared to these others.

5. I-DOC researchers identified more than half of the sessions as addressing issues and problems that cut across disciplines. In this sense, the sessions reflected the very structure of NPAC itself. Given the intentional structure of the event – with service organizations holding their national membership meetings in the first days, and then combining on the last day – many of these cross-disciplinary topics were still discussed in separate camps. It was notable that subjects and even speakers were repeated in the meetings of different disciplines, suggesting that joint sessions might easily have been arranged. (The Chairman of the NEA, for instance, spoke separately in each disciplinary meeting and then again at the plenary).
6. The sessions focused on solutions as well as on problems. Indeed, over 50% of the sessions produced actionable ideas or next steps. In response to coordination and financial problems, for instance, participants and presenters suggested ideas about new or improved systems of information sharing or new management techniques. Interestingly, solutions proposed were mostly internal in nature, involving institutional action or collective action across institutions. There were hardly any suggested solutions that involved political action, advocacy or field outreach, legal or governmental answers.
7. What did emerge strongly and surprisingly from the research overall is an interest in collectively oriented solutions – coordination across institutions, collective activity of one kind or another, improved connections and partnerships. This interest in collectivity matches the format and goals of the NPAC itself, of course, in its intention to bring the disciplines together. Researchers note the prevalence of collective or aggregated ideas and the “groping” of leaders for more “engagement.” However, this interest is mitigated to some extent by other observations of the researchers, who note that the advocacy of collective behavior tended to be discipline-specific and institutionally based in nature. Session participants thought within their genres and in management terms. They did not suggest actions that would take them into

broader policy-making or problem-solving, or that would inspire resource or idea sharing. The message here is mixed – the participants express interest in new ways of working, in new aggregations and shared activities, and yet the articulation, the imagining, of such solutions is lacking.

8. Listing the “big ideas” that emerged from the sessions, researchers also reflected this interest in collectivity or communication. For instance, public outreach emerged as a “big idea” - in the forms of marketing, arts education, government and media relations, community programming, audience development. There was a consistent current of interest in improving communication both within and across institutions. Additionally, issues of technology emerged as “big ideas” in several sessions, and there was an emergent interest in ethics in the field.
9. Overall, the research from the convention reveals that its topics, problems and solutions, the controlling ideas, were decidedly practical, discipline driven and institutionally derived. There was certainly an emphasis throughout the meeting on collectivity and communication, on the need for collaboration, but even that big idea was phrased in disciplinary and institutional terms. Compared to the broader ideas and hopes for national import that were expressed beforehand, the Convention seems largely to have defined itself in familiar terms. The finding implicit in the I-DOC analysis is that the selection of format, topics and speakers for this first NPAC (which was necessarily a hybrid of separate and combined events) may have militated against a national mandate, underscoring instead the more typical offerings that the separate associations make in their annual meetings. The value of those offerings and of the NPAC sessions are profound, as is made clear in the reactions of participants and in the observations of the researchers. But the distinctive value of parallel and joint association meetings remains to be realized.

## ***Post Convention Reflections***

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1. Almost 70% of the post-convention interviewees reported that they had remained in Pittsburgh for the joint session on the last day. 50% reported that they had attended more than 8 sessions. However, due to the conference format, only 15 to 20% reported having attended a session outside their own discipline before the final day. Extrapolating from these results, it seems that interest in the joint Convention was high, but that the separate Association activities permitted less interaction than that interest might have yielded.

2. Interviewees reported that “declining audiences” and “financial resources” were the problems or issues most covered at the Convention. This report does not in fact correspond to the primary problems/obstacles reported at the Convention itself, but funding issues apparently continue to be perceived as most critical, despite that fact. When asked to report on the “solutions” most often offered at the Convention, interviewees remembered “strategic partnerships,” and “better communication strategies” as most common, and – in fact – these are the solutions reported as most prevalent at the Convention. But, once home, interviewees tend to phrase this idea as “improved connection to local community.” Interviewees also reported that a resonant idea that they had taken home was an interest in partnerships and collaborations. But again, once they are home, they tend to interpret this idea as local partnerships and collaborations, as “deeper community engagement” and the need to better comprehend the interests of their local constituencies
3. When asked whether they had made a potentially valuable connection to someone from another discipline at the Convention, the interviewees’ answers were once again specific and local. They named individuals they had met. They also reported, in answer to another question, that they had not found partners for programs and projects; rather, they expressed strong commitment to building relationships within their own neighborhoods.
4. Other significant ideas that emerged for these interviewees tended also to be practical, related to their institutional behaviors. They talked of learnings in marketing and audience building techniques, on leadership issues, on funding and management. These answers, reflecting the results of their time in Pittsburgh, bear little resemblance to the large ideas and issues, the expectations that these same professionals took to the Convention. There is one mention only in these post-convention answers of “improving the national perception of the arts and their priority.” It seems clear that there has been a movement from pre-convention to post-convention away from national, interdisciplinary aspirations to immediate, practical concerns and lessons.
5. The Convention seems to promise a significant amount of follow-up activity, however, and the reflections on it are positive. Most of the interviewees who identified issues or ideas of importance coming from the Convention intend to take action - circulating information; fostering collaborations; building program, research or outreach activities. And they reported that the NPAC was useful in a

diversity of ways, most specifically in enabling them to network and to learn about trends and conditions in the arts.

6. Overall, it is safe to say that the Convention produced a practical, immediately professional, institutionally important level of outcome. The original level of expectation for a national mission, a national dialogue, does not persist into the Convention, or – certainly – back into the structures and the lives of these interviewees. The value of the meeting is reported in much more direct and predictable terms. The participants are satisfied with the results they get; they interpret the experiences at the NPAC for their own action; they value the interactions with their peers, and they positively appreciate Pittsburgh. These are significant accomplishments for a first national effort at uniting the performing arts. But it may be important for the conveners to remember that the ambition for national attention and a national stage for the arts is present in the field, and that it remains a challenge worth undertaking to call up that ambition.