

National Arts Administration Mentorship Program Report to the Field: A Record and Reflection of Value-based Learning

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executive summary

This report documents the National Arts Administration Mentorship Program (NAAMP). The project was intended to mentor the next generation of arts administrators working in small and mid-sized artist-centered organizations. NAAMP was envisioned as a response to this field's concern about continuity, legacy, and the cultivation of values-centered leadership. More than the mere transfer of administrative skills and knowledge, NAAMP addressed issues of organizational development. In addition, the project intended to share its mentorship approach with the field and to disseminate its experiences and lessons.

Five arts organizations across the country, including a healthy mix of disciplines, aesthetics, and cultures, identified mentors on their senior staffs and hosted fellows as fulltime staff members for a year.

Participating organizations were two artist-led organizations—Pat Graney Company in Seattle and El Centro Su Teatro in Denver—and three multidisciplinary arts centers—DiverseWorks in Houston, Hallwalls in Buffalo, and Creative Time in New York City.

In addition to offering fellows practical day-to-day experience and regular contact with a mentor, NAAMP also provided them with access to learning tools and activities; structured evaluation measures; outside consultants and resources; other learning opportunities; and national exposure on panels and forums. NAAMP recognized and supported self-directed learning, learning across generations, and a peer network. Multifaceted and flexible, the project demonstrated that learning happens on several levels, through many approaches.

The report includes three major parts:

1. Documentation of the project and its activities.
2. An analysis of the outcomes, challenges, and lessons learned.
3. Recommendations for the future development of a national mentoring project.

The report also includes case studies on each of the five sites and a reflection from program director Vesna Todorović Miksić.

Partners and Funders

NAAMP was created by a partnership among four organizations: the National Performance Network (NPN), an 18-year-old consortium of over 60 community cultural centers and presenters of contemporary performance; the National Association of Artists' Organizations (NAAO), a network of over 600 individuals and organizations dedicated to serving and preserving artist-driven organizations; DiverseWorks, an 18-year-old multidisciplinary arts space active in both NAAO and NPN; and the Master of Arts in Arts Administration program at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the nation's foremost programs for professionals in arts management.

Funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Albert A. List Foundation, and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. The five mentor sites also provided financial support, through direct cash contributions, innumerable hours of staff time, and other indirect expenses, such as telephone, supplies, and equipment.

Program Goals and Indicators of Success

NAAMP had three goals:

1. Create an innovative learning structure.
2. Increase the organizational capacity of participants in management, curatorial vision, and arts advocacy.
3. Develop a base of knowledge that can be transferred to the national arts field.

During the planning phase, NAAMP identified indicators of success that included:

- Providing field training for the fellows.
- Strengthening mentoring organizations through co-learning and professional development for key staff.
- Enabling organizations and the artists they support to engage in ongoing dialogue.
- Assisting fellows with job placement after the project period.
- Fostering cross-generational learning.
- Building a transition and succession process into institutional planning.
- Raising national awareness about the importance of leadership development in the arts.
- Contributing to the national dialogue about the importance and sustainability of the sector.

- Recording and sharing with the field, through regional and national meetings and publications, findings about the benefits of one-on-one professional development through mentoring.

An analysis of the degree to which NAAMP achieved these indicators of success (based on exit interviews, final written reports from both mentors and fellows, and portfolio presentations at the end of the project) is included in the section of the report entitled "Outcomes and Indicators of Success."

Learning Principles

NAAMP developed its approach to participatory peer learning by drawing from the global movements of popular education and participatory research and evaluation, as described by Paulo Freire and others. A basic premise of the project was that both fellows and mentors would learn from each other—that every participant would be both a co-learner and a resource.

NAAMP used two tools to make evident the learning process: a Learning Plan and a portfolio. The Learning Plan organized learning into three areas—skills, knowledge, and values—to emphasize that professional development must go beyond the acquisition of skills to a deepening of knowledge and a conscious embodiment of values. Public portfolio presentations not only described the fellows' accomplishments and demonstrated increased competency, but also included reflection and analysis.

Project Elements

NAAMP included four major activities interwoven with two major threads of peer support/networking and reflection/self-evaluation:

1. Onsite pragmatic experience. The mentor and fellow negotiated specific duties essential to the work of the site. Central to this onsite experience was routine and regular access to senior staff.
2. Two convenings, featuring group discussions, panels, and other learning opportunities, on topics ranging from the development of practical skills to the exploration of challenges facing the national arts field. NAAMP provided access to both a peer exchange and a wider circle of resources, including local arts leaders, foundation officers, entrepreneurs, and other consultants.

3. Professional development opportunities. Fellows were encouraged to participate in local, national, and regional gatherings; make site visits; moderate panels; and enroll in workshops.

4. Organizational learning through guided exercises and onsite workshops. Mentors helped create the Learning Plans and were full participants in the convenings. Onsite consultations and workshops addressed the mentors' human resource and organizational development challenges.

Lessons Learned

In both its accomplishments and its challenges, NAAMP has many lessons to share with the field.

Field Learning

Mentorship is a process that goes beyond the two parties (mentor and fellow) to involve the broader staff. Thus, organizations can be as deeply affected as individuals. Also, fellows created mentor-like relationships with other participants in the program. Broadening the primary relationship to a wider circle (other mentors, project partners, staff, and consultants) added dimension and diversity to the fellows' experience and resources.

Fellows learned a valuable lesson when they began to understand how the mentor does his or her own work—particularly how the mentor makes decisions. Another important lesson is the value of dealing with conflict in a creative and productive way, as a powerful tool for positive change and growth. Finally, providing a “coach” for the entire process, available to fellow and mentor alike, was a valuable addition.

Organizational and Individual Learning

NAAMP fundamentally changed its participant organizations, stimulating processes that will continue for years to come. Organizations applied the tools and skills developed in the program to a wide range of areas, such as staff training, communications, and supervision. They also strengthened teamwork and developed staff leadership. Balancing organizational priorities and values was another major arena for organizational learning.

In both expected and unexpected ways, participants learned an array of skills and gained valuable knowledge in conflict resolution, communication, planning, leadership, human resource development, training, and the prioritizing and evaluating of programs. Fellows developed

specific skills in fundraising, budgeting, curating, and developing and evaluating programs. They also increased their self-confidence and raised difficult questions about organizational practices. Mentors were challenged to think in new ways and to re-examine how well they were carrying out the mission of their organizations.

Best Practices

NAAMP was designed to incorporate a certain set of “best practices,” such as a clearly defined “job description” for the fellow, a guarantee of regular access to the mentor, rigorous thinking about excellence, and activities that engage different learning styles. Other best practices that informed the program design include:

- Mentorship is a reciprocal process that benefits both the mentor and the fellow.
- Mentorship requires a significant commitment of time, clarity of goals, planning, and flexibility on both the mentor's and the fellow's part. Being a good mentor involves deliberate contact and interaction.
- A fellow's learning is directly related to having access to all areas of organizational operations, as is the mentor's ability to analyze the operations and to make them comprehensible, transparent, and learnable.
- Gaining knowledge about the issues that affect the field nationally strengthens fellows' capacity to prosper as arts administrators.
- Adults learn best when they control the terms of the learning: the Learning Plan allowed the fellows to articulate their own learning goals and, with their mentors, to design their own workplan.
- Activities that use the strength of the arts and the creative process are powerful learning tools.

Recommendations

The report contains several recommendations for the next phase of NAAMP that address issues of structure, process, and curriculum. Some of these recommendations include:

- NAAMP should rebuild and expand the partnership with new organizations, particularly a new academic partner. Additionally, connections with similar programs in other fields, such as education and social service, will add depth and resonance to the project.
- Maintaining a small scale will allow NAAMP to continue to work deeply, combining mentoring with organizational development.

- Convenings should continue to involve the local arts communities where they take place.
- The project design was comprehensive and multifaceted, but some improvements can be made:
 - Other staff members should be brought into the process earlier.
 - Mentors should develop a Learning Plan to be more intentional and explicit about their own learning. Project staff can help link the Learning Plans and portfolios more clearly to stated criteria for excellence.
 - The pool of money available for training, travel, and taking advantage of special opportunities should extend beyond the fellowship period.
 - The curriculum should focus more extensively on how mentors articulate and transmit values.
 - The balance of time and focus at the convenings should allow more time for reflection and organizational work.

While on the surface NAAMP appears to have served only a few fellows, it had a deep impact on their mentors and, even more important, built the capacity of their organizations, whose work serves thousands. What might be a more affordable and sustainable model of NAAMP? How can NAAMP maintain its strengths: flexibility, participatory peer learning, and in-depth organizational as well as individual development, within the framework of a more affordable program?

An alternative model is a “cluster” model suggested by program director Todorovic. NAAMP would provide structure, coordination, coaching and learning tools, regional and national peer-to-peer networking, and a curriculum offered at national annual convenings. In addition, each fellow would have access to a professional development travel fund, and funds would be reserved for each mentoring organization to address their needs for growth in areas of human resource and leadership development for all staff.

Further Considerations

As the NAAMP model seeks to inform the development of mentoring and leadership development programs across the country, it will be important to keep in mind the following open questions related to both mentorship and the future of the field. How can mentorship programs strengthen small and mid-sized organizations without overtaxing them? What is the impact of generational shifts in attitudes toward work? How can the value and respect for small and mid-sized organizations be increased and thus support the sustainability of this sector? How can mentorship address the problem of succession faced by so many organizations?

NAAMP succeeded in investing in new leaders, re-energizing veteran leaders, and strengthening collective support for the development of visionary and capable administrators. In a traditionally under-capitalized arts and culture field, this commitment to the development of human resources is both necessary and courageous.

Report Distribution Information

The complete report will be available in March 2002.

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The report will be available online in February 2002 at the following URLs:

www.arts.gov/artforms/NAAMP/NAAMP.html

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