

ICFAD SPEECH 10.05.2018

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- President Sparks and the International Council of Fine Arts Deans' Board of Directors
- Thank you all for your work to collaborate with each other

I'm pleased to be here, as I am a former student of the fine arts. I loved my experience as a music major in college. I know that the wonderful experiences I had were made possible by those who taught me, including my School of Music dean, who was widely expected and beloved; not only for his knowledge of the subject, but also because he cared. He cared about us as students. He cared about the faculty, and he understood how all of these pieces fit together to create an environment where we could thrive. I know that you are dedicated to the same. It's a never-ceasing, continual process, never ceasing, and it takes a special person to be the Dean; a person who embraces the process.

WHY ARTS ADVOCACY?

So, does arts advocacy really make any difference? Well, the short answer is, yes. I am eager to talk with you today, because I get to do a deeper dive into the dynamics that are very real. These dynamics may seem like nuances to others. But these so-called nuances can guide our strategies; and help us all be an advocate for the arts in very practical ways.

Advocacy is important. And many times, we associate our advocacy efforts with the government: Municipal leaders, elected officials; in our local communities, or on the state level; and also with Congress on the federal level. But we also advocate for the arts by creating meaningful relationships – with our colleagues, our friends and neighbors, especially with those who are not in the arts. Advocating for the arts is a timely topic, for a couple of reasons: First of all, it is on our minds. Advocating to support the National Endowment for the Arts and its sibling federal cultural agencies is on the minds of many. This was sparked by the recommendation of the Administration to eliminate these agencies from the budget, so there has been a lot of exposure over this. And this recommendation has been met with disappointment by supporters of the arts across the nation; not only because it would eliminate some funding to the arts, but because having the arts as a line item in the federal budget is viewed to be a symbol of what is important to our nation. So, at this point in the federal conversation, the argument has not only been about the amount designated for the arts and humanities, but equally as important, keeping the agencies as a line item in the budget.

Another reason that the topic of advocating for the arts is timely, is that unlike other sectors, the arts do not have a formal lobbying system in place. Certainly, such a system would violate IRS rules, since much of the arts that require advocating for, fall within the nonprofit and government sectors. There are some other sectors that have an arts focus with their own lobbyists. Commercial movies, for example, have the Motion Picture Association of America trade association. But for the most part, the nonprofit and government nature of many arts programs including those in higher education institutions are not under the umbrella of a formal advocacy system. Instead of depending upon someone else to advocate for us because that's what they're paid to do, we advocate as volunteers, because we believe in what the arts do for us.

During my term at the National Endowment for the Arts, I was able to visit several hundred communities of all sizes and shapes, in all 50 states: We talked with artists and arts leaders, city leaders, and businesses. We held focus groups and town hall meetings with the general public, across the nation, and we also visited five other countries, and had active conversations with a total of 85 countries about the arts in their countries. And we came away with two insights: The first insight is that the arts are thriving across the nation. It's not just the arts on the east and west coasts; they're everywhere. I know you know that very well. But they're not all

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thriving in the same ways. We used to define the arts one way. Now, that old definition is expanding, and my personal experience is that the criticisms about cutting the arts have come from those who still think of the arts through the old definition. So, one of the ways we can advocate for the arts, is to make sure that we are helping people understand that the arts are not off in a corner by themselves.

The second insight is that people across the nation are yearning for two things: They want to feel like they belong. They're looking for meaning, and they want something to touch their hearts. They want to have their own identities recognized. They don't want to be force-fit into having to give up one identity at the expense of another. And second, they yearn to be able to expand: to be inspired to imagine what their lives can be. They don't want to be stuck. They want to solve old problems in new ways. And the arts are leading the way to give people the creative outlet to have this expansion.

To set some context, there is a difference between the ways America engaged with the arts three-plus decades ago, and today, and there are two reasons for this evolution: one is the internet, and the other is an augmentation of the demographics in the U.S. Fifty, 40, 30 years ago, the general focus of the arts was on the products that the arts produced: Performances on stage, recordings, exhibitions in museums, and a measure of success was the number of tickets sold at event. There was also a mindset that suggested the classical arts were front and center. And the key word to highlight is versus: Excellence versus inferiority; highbrow versus lowbrow. If you were involved in the arts for the sake of its purity and beauty alone, it also meant that those involved in a commercial side of the arts were separate, off in another corner. Professional artists were deemed as real artists, but the regular public who may have enjoyed creating something as an amateur would be relegated to saying, "oh, I'm not an artist. That guy over there is an artist. My fourth grade teacher told me I wasn't creative, so I don't like the arts." I was absolutely trained that way. In college, I worked hard to wall myself off from others when I went to the practice room, so that I could evoke the purity from within myself, and not be tainted by others ideas. And impresarios and gallery representatives played a key role in recognizing an artist. But things are different, now that we have the Internet. We have an array of ways to participate in the arts. And the arts now belong to all of us, each in our own ways. Certainly, there are musicians who perform on stage, or in recording all of the time, and painters and sculptors who do not often venture out of their studios, except to attend gallery openings, and there always will be. But now, we also see artists whose work focuses on social practice. And there are folk & traditional artists who do not sell their work, but creative solely for the cultural or spiritual life of their communities. And the lines are blurring. The same artists are toggling back and forth between arts for the sake of beauty alone, and arts for commercial purposes, or connecting the arts to those who have fewer socioeconomic opportunities. There is an explosion of artists who are mixing up art in hybrid ways. The same artist working in the visual arts can also be working in the performing arts and other media. Artists are now working as artists in non-arts areas: science labs, tech companies, senior centers, businesses, hospitals, mayors' offices. European classics are celebrated. But so is jazz. And blues. Folk art, hip-hop, storytelling, mariachi, barathanatyam, visual art exhibitions made from found objects, and much more. The use of impresarios and gallery reps is no longer the only way to have your art career endorsed. Artists are uploading their work onto their own websites for the general public to see. Pop-up galleries are serving as a showcase for the arts, as well as a revitalization strategy for downtowns. Musicians are uploading their performances on YouTube. Before, in elementary and secondary arts education, there was a lot of emphasis in professional artists coming into a single classroom to show students their art. Today, instead of focusing on individual artists, and single classrooms, many arts educators are working with classroom teachers and community groups, and their state governments to design curricula that integrate the arts with other subjects, like science and math.

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In addition to the ubiquitous presence of the internet, the demographics in the United States have evolved. Seven years ago, in 2011, for the first time in the history of the United States, there were more non-Caucasian babies born than Caucasian. The demographic projections – from William Frey’s research at the Brookings Institution – show that soon after the year 2040, the U.S. will not have a population group labeled as “minorities”. With an increase in racial and ethnic diversity, there also comes an increase in the variety of cultural perspectives, and the arts are an outstanding way to honor the diverse perspectives, and make people feel like they belong.

Let’s take a look at some of the criticisms about the arts: Here are a couple related to the economy: “Support of the Arts should take a back seat to jobs and programs that increase the local economy”. Contrary to this criticism, arts jobs have a presence. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2015, there were 2.3 million people who had primary jobs as artists. Artists as a group earn more than the overall U.S. labor force and they are a highly educated bunch: 59% of artists have bachelor degrees or higher, compared with 31% of U.S. workers overall. Another criticism: “Well, those artists are only on the east and west coasts”. Actually, some of the arts jobs are contributing to small, remote communities. Take Whitesburg, Kentucky, for example. One of the economically poorest regions of the United States, where nearly 25% of all residents live in deep poverty. But an arts organization there is creating movies, videos, it broadcasts radio, and teaches people how to make stringed instruments. It creates theater productions. Now, the community credits the arts for bringing back \$1.5 million back to the local economy through salaries and arts programs. Here’s another criticism: “The arts are a burden to the economy”. Actually, the arts contribute more than you might expect to the US economy. The arts generate \$763.6 billion per year, or 4.2 percent of the GDP. The US also exported \$20 billion more in art than it imported, providing a positive trade balance; 4.9 million people employed in America’s arts industries earned \$372 billion in total compensation for 2015. Other criticisms that we have heard have typically related to the role of government, or how the arts are measured for their success. For example, “The government should not be giving handouts”. Relative to the National Endowment for the Arts and it’s sibling federal agencies, these government agencies provide a competitive grant application process, which is not a handout. Now, one of the things we did during my term at the NEA, in addition to having a competitive grant process was to see where grants were not being awarded. There, we did go to a number of those locations and offer grantwriting workshops on how to apply to the NEA, because we wanted as much of the nation to be connected to the arts. But organizations still have to apply through a competitive grant process, which is different from a handout. Another criticism is that, “Private philanthropy should take care of the arts.” But the reality is, that all of the sectors of society are in this together. The market sector, government sector, and the nonprofit/philanthropic sector. There is only one funder of the arts – both in private philanthropy and government in the United States – which funds in all 50 states and U.S. territories, in all 435 Congressional Districts, in 16,000 of the 19,000 communities, large, small, urban, rural, remote, tribal, and that is the National Endowment for the Arts.

So, I hope this sets some context on what we’re experiencing, and the kinds of arguments against the arts to which we can respond. But at the end of the day, the important work that you are doing as Deans of Fine Arts institutions is about something much deeper. You are creating an environment for your students, as well as your faculty to be the creative leaders we need. We used to look for the types of leaders who were experts in one subject. There’s nothing wrong with being the master of a specific subject. But today, you are leading students through conditions where they need to learn how to sort through and synthesize disparate pieces. They need to know how to stand in the midst of ambiguity and make the most of the situation without shrinking back, and the arts are leading the way, in giving people the creative outlet to meet their own

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identities and have this expansion. I experienced this myself when I was a child. My parents were born in the beautiful country of China. I was born in Oklahoma and grew up in Arkansas. So, my bok choy/corn dog life was all about navigating through multiple perspectives at the same time. But it was my music training, and my drawing lessons that allowed me to express myself more fully. I could transcend the linear use of everyday conversations to communicate, because through the arts, I had a vocabulary set that incorporated my heart. I didn't have to choose whether I was going to be Chinese or Arkansan. I didn't have to give up one perspective at the expense of another perspective. I didn't have to be stuck in someone else's framework, unless I chose it. Instead, the world was, and is at my fingertips, and yours, too, whenever we can imagine what can be, beyond what is. Because the arts are not about either this or that, they are about both this and that.

Amidst all of the requirements that pull you in different directions on a daily basis, from raising money, to making sure that you have a specific student count, and everything else, I want to thank you for the work that you do. We hear criticisms about the arts, and we have hard-evidence answers to support what we know intuitively, and it is important to get those hard-evidence responses out there. But what you're really doing is creating an educational environment where people can learn how to create meaning in their lives, where we can honor different styles, different perspectives, and where we can expand and imagine what life can be. From my perspective, that is the biggest reason that we should advocate for the arts.

Thank you.