



**Small and Midsized Presenters in the United States:  
*Stories and Perspectives***

Submitted to the

**Association of Performing Arts Professionals**

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

In the spirit of learning and collaboration, I am pleased to release the report, *Small and Midsized Presenters in the United States: Stories and Perspectives*. As a service organization, the Association of Performing Arts Professionals (APAP) is dedicated to developing and supporting a robust performing arts industry and the professionals who work within it. That dedication charges us to understand and respond to the needs of presenters of different sizes that are working in different environments.

In the past few years, thanks to our communication partnership with the Wallace Foundation, we have been able to develop and share audience development resources for the presenting field. Realizing that presenting is not one-size-fits-all work, we noticed that not all of the resources we shared resonated for all presenters. In response, we undertook this preliminary study to begin learning about the realities and needs of small and midsized presenters, many of whom operate in rural areas. Both focus groups and interviews illuminated their circumstances and offered insights for us and will, we think, enlighten the field.

Because this study is formative, we know that its findings cannot be applied broadly to draw conclusions about the presenting field or all small and midsized presenters. But there will be more to the story. We hope this report prompts broader research to assess the realities and needs of a part of our constituency that is vital, yet sometimes overlooked.

The findings in this report have implications for our program and services and we hope to better support and increase the visibility for this vibrant segment of the field. In the short term, the report will help us frame future audience development resources. It will also inform future programming for year-round professional development and conference sessions. It may lead to additional programs or resources that support small and midsized organizations.

We are deeply grateful to our colleagues: at the Western States Arts Alliance, Tim Wilson and Jennifer Stewart, and at Arts Midwest, Brian Halaas and Angela Urbanz, who helped identify participants and generously offered space, time and logistic support during their conferences. Without them this study would not have been possible. We acknowledge the 19 presenters who took time out of their busy lives to meet and share with us. We are grateful for the diligent and expert work of our project and study consultant, Suzanne Callahan, of Callahan Consulting for the Arts, for her counsel and leadership with this project. Finally, we thank the Wallace Foundation, for their keen interest in and openness to broadening the context of their own work.

In sharing the perspectives of small and midsized presenters, we strive to raise their voices, tell their stories, and eventually build community among them as well as with our larger membership.

Krista Rimple Bradley

Director of Programs and Resources, Association of Performing Arts Professionals

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## Introduction

The Association of Performing Arts Professionals (APAP) commissioned Callahan Consulting for the Arts (the consultant) to conduct research on small and medium-sized presenting organizations. Findings were to inform APAP's decisions for future service provision and programs, as well as additional research it might conduct.

The goal of the research was to explore issues impacting the work of these presenters,<sup>1</sup> particularly their efforts to build and engage audiences in their communities. The research design drew from successful community engagement and audience building strategies from the Wallace Foundation (Wallace) and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (DDCF). As a communications partner for the Wallace Foundation over the past four years, APAP had been sharing the ways in which Wallace engagement methods, as documented in its 2014 report *Road to Results*<sup>2</sup> were utilized by the presenting field. DDCF had recently published a series of articles documenting the findings and practices from its national initiatives designed to engage audiences and communities, drawing from its more than 300 grantees in the presenting, dance, and theater fields.<sup>3</sup> APAP wished to learn about the ways in which the findings and practices in these recent resources might be relevant to, or contextualized for, small- and medium-size presenters. Moreover, APAP intended to listen to and learn from the views of these presenters, which are not prevalent within its membership, so that their voices and perspectives could be known and considered. APAP has incorporated speaker(s) from focus groups into a presentation of focus group findings during its 2019 conference.

## Research Questions

APAP staff and the consultant posed the following questions, which informed the research design:

- What is the current context in which these presenters are working, including circumstances, challenges and opportunities?
- What are any changes that presenters observe in their broader communities, or within their organizations, particularly if those changes influence the way in which they do their work?
- In what ways do the resources above reflect, or miss, these presenters' working circumstances?
- What are any needs of these organizations that APAP might be able to accommodate?

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<sup>1</sup> The terms presenter, interviewee, and attendee are used throughout this report to refer to all small and midsized presenters who participated in the study, whether from focus groups or individual interviews.

<sup>2</sup> Harlow, Bob. *The Road to Results: Effective Practices for Building Arts Audiences*. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2014. The resource draws from data-supported case studies examining the successes achieved and challenges faced by 10 different arts organizations as they undertook multi-year efforts to build their audiences.

<sup>3</sup> "The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has worked with five re-granting partners to support the exploration and implementation of new ideas in audience building and community engagement....These programs, in addition to the foundation's own Building Demand for the Arts, include Dance/USA's Engaging Dance Audiences, the Association of Performing Arts Professionals' Creative Campus and later Building Bridges, National Performance Network's Performance Residency Fund (now Artistic Engagement Fund) and Community Fund, Theatre Communications Group's Future Audiences and later Audience (R)Evolution and EmcArts' Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts. ... This series of articles shares the learning from this body of work." <http://www.ddcf.org/what-were-learning/audience-and-community-engagement/>. Accessed November 8, 2018.

## Methodology

In order to address these questions, at this early stage in its research, APAP opted for a formative design that would allow for open exchange with presenters, using a combination of focus groups and individual interviews. As an initial research method, this design was more appropriate than a survey of a larger pool, which typically generates short, limited, written responses that do not reveal respondents' complex circumstances and realities.<sup>4</sup>

Three focus groups were facilitated in Indianapolis and Las Vegas prior to the annual conferences of two regional service organizations: the Western Arts Alliance and the Arts Midwest. APAP recruited attendees, drawing from sampling frames provided by both of these regional organizations, whose memberships include presenters that were relevant to the research topic. In order to be recruited within this purposeful sample, attendees needed to be in a leadership position within their organizations and of the budget size that would deem them small or midsized. Overall, APAP sought attendees that could share a variety of contexts, from rural to more populated areas, with budgets of less than \$2 million and artist fees of less than \$300,000. A number of incentives were offered. These members were already attending the regional conferences and therefore would be onsite and available. At each focus group a raffle awarded one attendee a free registration for the APAP conference, and each attendee was provided lunch and a modest gift card. The invitation stressed APAP's interest in learning about these presenters' circumstances and that all views were welcome. Following the focus groups, additional interviews were conducted to incorporate the views of presenters in the South, as well as increase the representation of independent presenters. A total of nineteen presenters were included in the study.

The questions posed to presenters were open ended, in order to elicit more specific and nuanced responses. The structure and wording of questions incorporated key points from a review of resources named above. Questions gauged presenters' awareness of and changes that had taken place within their communities and organizations; their audience and community engagement efforts; perceptions of how they differ from larger presenters; and needs that might be addressed by APAP. Within some of the questions, visual polling was combined with group discussion; attendees first registered their responses to the question on a flip chart, then noted the group's collective response, and finally discussed their collective impressions and experiences. The list of respondents and organizations appear in Appendix A. Questions asked appear within the body of this report.

In this formative, and limited, research design, it is important to note what one can, and cannot, conclude from these findings. Though the small sample was selected purposefully to elicit a range of views from presenters of different budget sizes, locations and organizational structures, it is not representative of all or even most small and midsized presenters in the U.S. Therefore, definitive statistical conclusions cannot be drawn about patterns in the overall presenting field; to do so would require a larger quantitative study.

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<sup>4</sup> While surveys, if gathered in statistically valid ways, can help identify trends, they do not allow the researcher to probe for deeper meaning or ask follow-up questions. Surveys would have elicited numbers but not the stories and explanations presented in this report. Qualitative findings often inform the design of a quantitative instrument because they identify the nuanced questions that need to be asked.

That said, because presenters were forthcoming with the impressions they shared and stories they told, this report illuminates something of what it is like to live and work in their communities, which range from urban neighborhoods, to tourist destinations, to suburbs, to rural, mountainous towns. It conveys the ways in which they are, as some said, “small and mighty,” as they stretch their limited budgets, wear multiple hats to fulfill all job functions with extremely small staff, navigate polarized political climates and face daunting challenges, including—for some—continually justifying their very existence within large institutions. Some of their audiences are wealthy while others live in abject poverty. They interact with patrons who comfortably enter and donate to their venues and they strive to support those who do not or cannot attend, due to financial barriers or fears about being too visible in politically charged times. Their communities are Republican, Democrat and “purple,” as several described. Some of their success stories convey the ways in which they are working to overcome these challenges. What these presenters share is a commitment to bringing performances of the quality to their communities, and to providing ways for audiences to access, experience, and be transformed by the arts. One thing is clear from this research: typically, these organizations are the only presenters in their towns, and comprise a vital layer of the presenting ecosystem in our country—a layer that likely does not have the capacity to implement complex, labor-intensive audience-engagement strategies. In that regard, a question emerges from the assumptions that may underly this study: whether, given their context and unique realities, these presenters can follow the practices described in all of the resources named above, or whether the resources themselves reflect these presenters’ realities.

### **About this Report**

The report begins with an overview of respondents by budget size and organizational type. Presenters first share their perspectives on the larger environment in which they work, including any changes in demographics, industry, gentrification, and political climate. They then zero in on their own organization and its work, including any changes in context and capacity. They then share their audience engagement and development efforts, both those that have succeeded and those that have not. Interestingly, they share the ways in which they differ from larger counterparts. Finally, presenters offer a few suggestions for what would strengthen their work and organizations.

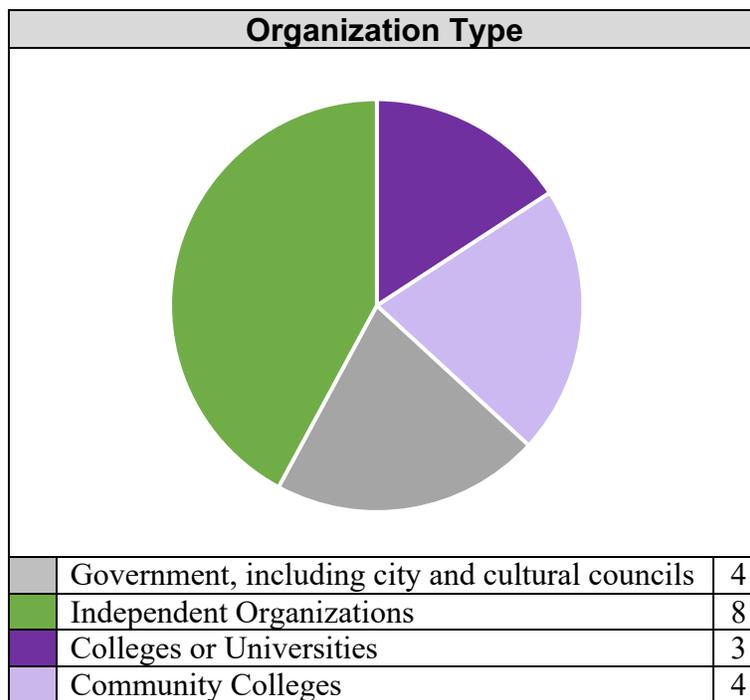
## Overview of Interviewees

### Location

Presenters hail from 14 states around the country including: AR, CA, CO, ID, IL (2), MD, NC, NV, NY, OH (4), TX, UT, WA, and WV. Two are in urban areas, three are near major cities, and one is in a rapidly growing and gentrifying town. Others, particularly the colleges, are in more remote locations, and a few are based in extremely rural places.

### Organization Type<sup>5</sup>

As the chart below conveys, almost half of the respondents run independent organizations and the other half operate out of larger institutions, including colleges and governments.

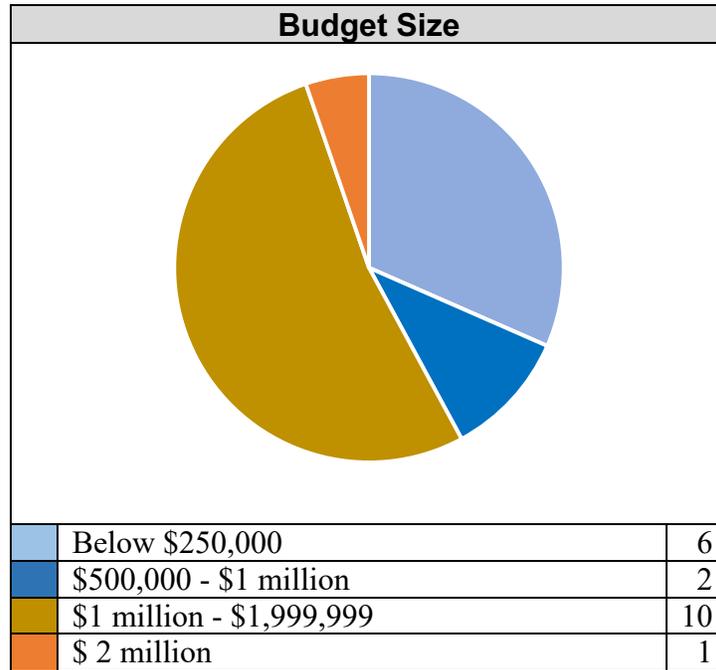


- Regarding their venues: For the independents, some own their buildings, several of which are undergoing expansion; some operate out of city-owned buildings; and one is in a national park. For government organizations, one is a well-financed city venue, one operates programs within a library.
- Staff size ranges from one with a single half-time position to another with 17 full-time and 80 part-time positions. Within the colleges, limited staff is sometimes augmented with support from other college departments, as well as work-study students.

### Budget Size

<sup>5</sup> The graphics in this section provide a visual composite of only the 19 presenters in this study and are not statistically or otherwise representative of the field of small and midsized presenters in the U.S. No larger quantitative conclusions should be drawn from them about the overall presenting field.

Presenters’ annual budgets range from \$30,000 to \$2 million. All independent organizations had budgets of \$1 million or above.



Presenters with smaller budgets seem to interpret and document their financial figures in disparate ways. Their figures may or may not include salaries, facilities and other overhead costs. Therefore, their stated budget size may not be a good indicator of their true working circumstances.<sup>6</sup> A few examples:

- One college presenter’s reported budget of \$45,000 includes a part-time salary and artist fees but excludes support from other departments within the college as well as university overhead, including venues and marketing.
- Another presenter operates within a city government’s library system and reported a similarly small budget of \$30,000.
- College presenters receive support from staff working in other departments, such as marketing and communications, whose salaries are not part of the presenters’ budgets.

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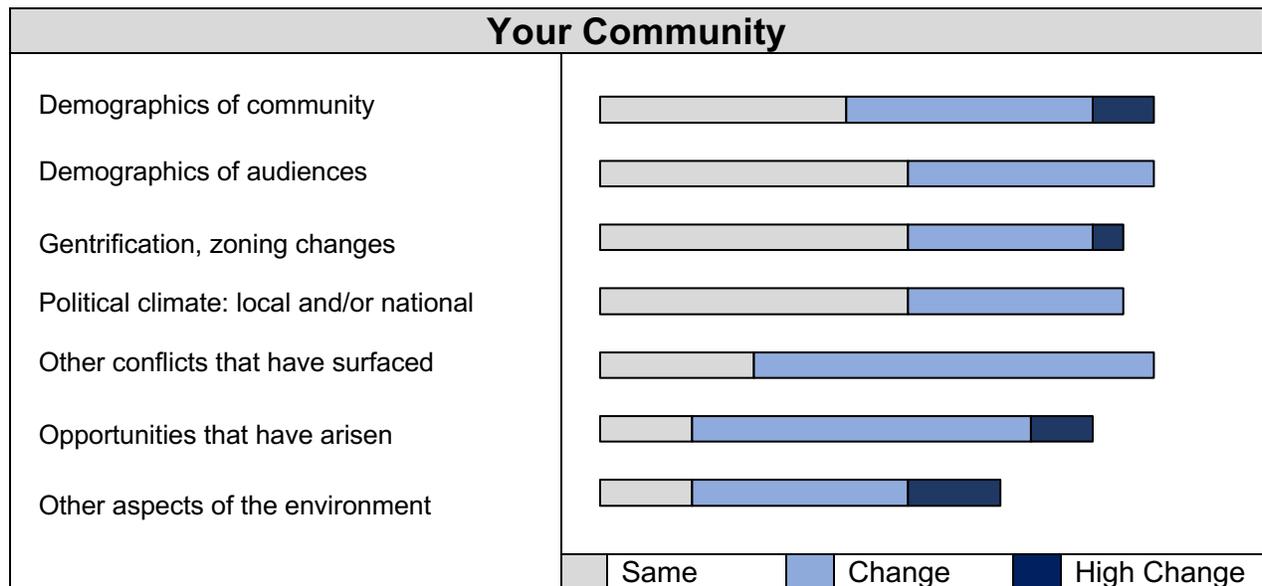
<sup>6</sup> These observations were based on limited commentary during focus groups and interviews. Additional research would be needed to fully assess and understand organizations’ budgets.

## Presenters' Community Environments

Discussions started with an overview of the environment in which presenters are working. Presenters were asked to first identify, within the past five years, which aspects of their communities have changed, and which have remained more or less the same and then to comment on the changes experienced. Presenters could speak to any of these areas:

- The overall demographics of their community or audiences
- Gentrification or other such shifts in their neighborhood, such zoning
- The political environment, locally and/or nationally
- Any conflicts or tensions that have surfaced, among residents or groups of people
- Any opportunities that have arisen
- Any other aspects of their environment that stood out to them

**Overall, the presenters involved in this study have experienced substantial change over the past five years.** As the visual below illustrates, the majority of presenters have weathered change in nearly all categories. What is not as obvious: those presenters that did not register change may face persistent problems that they wish would be solved. For example, the shading marked as “Same” in the political line largely indicates presenters who are challenged by their community’s long-time conservatism.



### Demographics

**Though a few spoke of communities’ remaining largely the same, most told complex stories of how changing demographics, along with shifts in industry and cost of living, influenced the environments in which they work and live.** Presenters who were longtime residents described these changes over extended time periods.

**Many spoke of populations that were rapidly diversifying ethnically.** One based outside of a large city in the West reflected on the degree of change that had taken place:

*When I started ... our area was a white suburb of [a larger city, with a major corporate employer]. They were a big player. [Now] ... we are one of the top 20 most diverse cities in the country. We have a huge immigrant population [and] lots of foreign-born people, including Latino, Mexican, Eastern European, Russian, Ukrainian, Somalian, and refugees from Syria. It has been a huge step for us, going from the old families that were involved in the service clubs and could always be counted on for season tickets and donations, to one that is much newer, and more transitional. Folks are difficult to reach because they are dealing with trying to get settled and learning a new language. It has been a massive change.*

Another outside of a large city in the Midwest shared similar contrasts: “The changes I have seen are racial. When I took the job, I checked the census and there were no people of color that lived here—zero!” Though the area is still predominately white, “you see [people of] Hispanic heritage, East Indian heritage, African Americans, and Africans. There is more exposure to people of different cultures.”

These shifts stand in contrast to a presenter outside a medium-sized city on the East Coast, whose demographics have been diverse for a long time, in “the bluest of the blue neighborhoods, the first to welcome mixed race couples in 1962, and still populated by ... New Yorker-reading, NPR-listening, aging hippies and their kids.”

**Often such ethnic diversification was tied to changing industry and opportunities—or lack thereof—for employment.** A different college presenter in the South, whose community has “always been the progressive stepchild” of their state, described how ethnic diversity increased due to available jobs at a well-known chicken corporation as well as to the policies of the major retail corporation based there: “if you are a vendor for the store, you are required to have someone live in [our area.] Therefore, our diversity is basically ethnicity, including a huge Pakistani, Indian, and Mexican” population. Another in a small town in the South described fluctuations in ethnicity, timed with the loss of a utility company as well as a buyout of a chicken producer: “We had a huge Hispanic population, part of whom were probably undocumented, who worked in the chicken houses.... Our schools became more Hispanic than African American.” With the loss of corporations, went “a lot of top people [who] had a lot of money,” as well as tax dollars. Yet a third small presenter in the West is in an area with a population of 45,000 serves people from eight counties but is “really homogenous, your typical white conservative large Mormon population.” Though its Latino population has increased to around 25%, its ethnic changes are slower paced than other presenters who commented. However, the town serves as a refugee resettlement location and just opened new energy bar and yogurt plants, “so we are getting more professionals and big ... businesses. The demographics are changing but not yet in a huge way.”

**The transient nature of some of the newer populations limits the degree to which presenters have been able to connect with these residents.** As one described, new residents are “coming from multiple places. We have the folks that are working at the meat packing plant, agricultural people who were brought in and are transient, refugees in a resettlement community who keep to themselves, and a very strong international student population who, especially from the Middle

East, stay for a very short period of time.” Added to that are faculty from a nearby college, “who are diverse but stay to themselves. So, we have these elements that do not really connect with each other, and a lot of them do not stay long.”

**Persistent challenges remain in some of the rural locations.** As one presenter simply stated, “We are a typical red state. There is no work here ... the coal mines shut down and there is no income.” For two presenters the opioid epidemic has been a major downfall. One described running out of its annual supply of Narcan (the antidote for opioid overdoses) in January: “I grew up here and it is not the same.” Another describes the opioid problem as “outrageous here. We have homeless students, parents who are addicts, and students who only eat when they are in school.”

## **Gentrification, Industry and Housing**

**Presenters described how industry trends and gentrification affect their communities, especially for longtime residents.** Particularly in the Arts Midwest focus groups and individual interviews, evidence of gentrification was apparent in four areas: tourism, farming, industry and housing.

**Tourism.** At least three are affected by increasing tourism that sometimes results in gentrification. A Northeast presenter based in a national park in an “ethnically homogenous” resort town where “in the winter, we have skiing, and in the summer, we get second-home owners.” In the summer, visitors remain for one to three months and in the winter, they remain only three to five days. The second presenter in the Central Plains is situated in a tourist-driven economy in the summer, but near to two Native American nations inhabited year-round by residents who “do not come and go a lot.” The third presenter’s Southern town has become a destination point for young families and vacationers. Eighteen years ago, it was a “little mountain town with artists, a lot of transient people. [It is now] the beer capital of the world ... [and] a foodie destination.” Rapid gentrification has become a source of controversy, generating anger and unrest between the long-term community and government. Longtime local residents “are being pushed out from neighborhoods where they lived and ran businesses. No one can afford to live here anymore. Then there are national stories where people who are ‘trespassing’ are beaten by the cops. It is not new, but it is intensifying.”

**Farming.** Three presenters located near larger cities described how their immediate areas have transitioned from farming communities to residential housing, serving as bedroom communities inhabited by residents who prefer to attend arts events in the cities. For one community college presenter, over a fourteen-year period, its farms were sold off and developed into mostly high-end housing, but “the people who moved into that housing have no buy-in into the local area, college or its arts programming.” They “do not know the community college is even there, let alone that it has a performing and visual arts center and gallery.” Another is based in an affluent area outside of a major city that was formed as gentleman farms, for people who live in the city and farmed on weekends: “Now even though it is a suburb and people live there year-round, there are [still] these large families with big homes and lots of money. As those people die or move to Florida, younger families either cannot afford, or do not want, giant houses.” Within that community there still exists “a contingency of people who want things to remain exactly the same, forever and ever, [resisting] any kind of change, such as zoning, to make the downtown more interesting. The sidewalks roll up at 9:00 p.m. You cannot even get a cup of coffee.” Such

resistance leaves young people who desire active lifestyles traveling to or living in other nearby suburbs, which this presenter viewed as a missed opportunity.

**Industry.** Others described, in smaller ways, the influences of businesses such as microbreweries and new restaurants, which attract younger residents. The presenter described above based in the town with the retail industry told a similar story: “Locals are being priced out of living in the area because we have such an influx of others, who are paid from other states,” in the form of higher salaries. “Our real estate has gone through the roof, such that locals are really being priced out of their homes [and] town.”

**Housing.** The stories above about presenter communities’ shifts in industry highlight changes in housing that influence who can afford to live where within their cities and towns. But other presenters told stories of equally dramatic change in their areas, due to hot real estate markets. An urban presenter described in detail such gentrification in the neighborhood: “I look at [my surrounding area] not only as one large hegemonic community, but a community within a community.” Situated in a predominantly Hispanic area of a city, one that is gentrifying rapidly, over the past four years houses have been flipped as residents overflow from a nearby, uber-gentrified, upper middle class, white waterfront area: “In some ways we must double down on members of community being impacted by that gentrification. We are not just doing concerts but doing intensive programming, so that the Latinos feel ownership.” Another in the Midwest, whose venue is run by a real estate developer, described the “incredible transformation” from an area that was economically depressed, a majority minority neighborhood: “It is an interesting situation...Fifteen years ago, if you were in the park across the street you were probably buying drugs, and now there are million-dollar condos.” This presenter went on to consider the dilemma inherent in such gentrification:

*It is great to have economic development in the neighborhood, with dozens of bars and restaurants. But you see a lot of the longtime population being pushed out, because of the economic forces. On one hand, we endeavor to be open to community and the neighborhood. Other the other hand, there is all of this money and opportunity that arts organizations need to take advantage of. That goes back to the same thing for me, which is the same for all of us ... the easiest return on investment are traditional arts audiences. We have to spend less money to get those traditional audiences than [to get] 25-year-olds.*

That raises question of who is in these presenters’ audiences, which is the next topic.

## **Audiences and Attendance**

*The frustrating thing is, profoundly, as the population in the community is changing, our audiences are not matching that change.*

This comment reflects a theme conveyed by many presenters: **despite big changes in their community demographics, audiences remain primarily older and white; as these patrons age, presenters share concern that their audiences will dwindle.** As one from the Midwest reported, “The demographics are the same, and the audience tends to be the same, but as they are aging, unfortunately we are losing a lot of them as they are going into assisted living and afraid of driving.” Such concerns were common in all three focus groups, as evidenced by this

comment from another as the “income level of audiences have stayed the same. But what has changed is that they are aging. They don’t drive at night, are afraid to go out, and are afraid of falling.” As another reported, “My audience continues to be predominately probably upper-middle-class, over 60. I sold ten-dollar tickets and hardly get kids or young people with kids.” One from the West described how audiences are “like a quilt,” including longtime elderly residents: “It is harder for them to get out in the evening.” But other attendance barriers exist for younger couples with small children who are “busy, busy, busy and going, going, going.”

**This persistent pattern of having older audiences begs the question of how to reach younger generations and whether it is possible to program for a wide range of ages.** These presenters share concern about meeting this goal but are unsure of how to do so. One offers a frank challenge: “The blue hairs are aging out...How do I figure out a program that will get the 8- to 22-year-olds to come, as well as the 60 and over to come?” Another offers, “I see the need to do programs for people who are younger, to do more progressive stuff, but I am afraid I am going to lose my shirt.” As another adds, “We have made attempts to diversify our programming. The audience is following us, but not fast enough.” Community college presenters wondered how to meet their students’ interests without losing older audiences, who are loyal and who donate. One such college described an older commuter student body, with an average age of 26, that works during the day. Another community college presenter agrees that students “are different [and] harder to pull in. So, no, [the pattern] is not changing.”

**Within the discussion of aging audiences, several offered a frank self-assessment—that their communities are segregated in other ways and that they serve only certain parts.** For some, the question of segregation remained on the table, to be pondered: “How do we build inroads [with other parts of our community] so that we are communicating with each other? We tend to keep to ourselves and our [own] community and it is a problem.” Some inroads have been made through partnerships. One enthusiastically described a book festival with a local Jewish community center and another spoke of the creation of a major museum that changed the arts landscape in their area as a large foundation is “pumping money into arts [which have] exploded in the community.” For another, dedicated audiences offer blind loyalty—to an extent that left the presenter uncomfortable and audiences’ expectations unmet. Telling stories of events that are loud and/or geared toward younger people, this presenter explained: “Sometimes audiences [attend] because they trust me. ... That audience’s default is that everything we are going to bring in is going to be for them and it is not. I worry terribly about them.”

## Political Climate

In all focus groups, the longest discussions were about the political environment. **There were striking differences in the working environments between presenters based in rural and conservative locations, as compared to those who are in or near liberal cities or enclaves such as college towns.**

**Those based mostly in rural locations told troubling stories of their encounters with conservatism in their communities, including personal clashes with xenophobia and at times, threats to safety.** Three stories convey how these clashes play out.

- One participant from a small town in the West frankly described, after Trump’s election, the “vein of nationalism and populism that is going on now. We have quite a few people

who drive through the towns with Confederate flags flying on their trucks.” This presenter, who works “in a pocket of liberalism” in a community college, described “die-hard conservatives” in the area as “more conservative than Utah,” and told a story of a refugee who committed a violent crime that made it into the national news; the town became “a hotbed for the refugee crisis” and its civic leaders, including the presenter’s family, “got death threats.”

- Another presenter in the West, who also reported seeing Confederate flags, quantified the political scene: “You cannot get elected locally without being Republican; 25 of the 26 candidates in the last round were Republicans by the time they got out of caucuses and onto the final ballot...It is that strong. And yet we are seeing a lot of disaffection with the national Republican Party.” This presenter went on to tell a story of a nearly century-old annual event in which participants dress in red face and enact a fight between cowboys and Native Americans; the event hit the news and forced dialogue among incredulous participants who were oblivious to what was wrong. Yet the controversy opened the door to dialogue; as the presenter said, “okay, everybody, we really have to have these conversations.”
- A third presenter of color, who used to require extra security, works at a facility that serves as a polling location and used to offer instructional sessions with the INS about citizenship but found that “once the political climate changed nationally, people were afraid to attend.” The program was phased out and voting has dropped off.

**In response, some of these presenters reported being “careful” in programming so as to not upset their communities** and getting “creamed” by negative letters if they program anything political. These realities are part of their day-to-day circumstances. The first presenter above who received death threats conveys caution: “I want to be even more careful. I never book anything that is going to really ... [upset locals]. You just have to be careful. And it has kind of ramped up some latent racism, honestly.” The second, in a primarily Mormon community, is fortunate that residents are “sending their children off internationally to do missions [because] they come back with a little bit better global awareness and a very strong support of the arts. That is helping soften, for us, a little, [the political reality] and it is getting people in a room together.” **Other presenters, including colleges, however, described living and working in liberal enclaves around the country, even if the surrounding area was conservative.** As one in the South said, “I am with the university [which] has its own little bubble” and another in the South described a community that is “very liberal, very progressive.”

**Several based in more liberal locations have committed to trying to ease the political tensions.** After Trump was elected, one in an urban area reflected “a shift in my thinking, that we looked at ourselves not as an arts organization [that creates programs with a] big weighty process that take three years to make. Where we found the most fire and intensity and energy was in being extremely nimble.” After the election, they ditched plans for an inaugural event about women and instead offered a fundraiser to cover legal costs for residents concerned about their immigration status, featuring Mexican dancing, drag, and queer comedians: “We have been doing that as a staple of programming for the past few years. Nimbleness and responsiveness are a priority.” Since then, this same presenter adopted a different approach to marketing:

*When Trump was elected, that was a very heavy moment in our neighborhood. The presence of ICE stepped up. We tried to be a nimble but welcoming space [but] we backed off in marketing to Latino communities. We realized that in the first six to eight months neighbors were afraid to come out to spaces like ours. We needed to be sure that all knew this was a place of respect by letting people gather for protest....But we were not doing Latino programming. ... We did a whole campaign around respecting individuality and being a welcoming space.*

Such shifts are easier for presenters in liberal communities in or near large cities. Another such presenter “shifted programming to be much more socially conscious ... just because I can and because my patrons are yearning for that—for a place to talk about these issues.” Another who is in a “purple community” with a donor base that is more Republican than Democrat strikes a delicate compromise between welcoming audiences and challenging their beliefs:

*Every time NEA is in trouble ... our board says we need to issue a statement. [But] we are very cognizant that we need to be sure we are a place for everyone, for all opinions. We do not want to make anyone uncomfortable coming here. Because internally we know that we cannot effect change or have conversations we want to have if people do not come in the door.... Programmatically we have been pushing boundaries a little more recently... through non-English and bilingual performances from other countries and LGBTQ programming. We have been able to affect the conversation ... but I try to make it a little bit slyer [so] you do not hit people over the head.*

A few presenters described the impact of local politics. In one presenter’s community, political turnover is low, as “the same people run things” for long time periods, including their mayor of 52 years. For a presenter in the South, “our conflicts always deal with the local politics in some ways” such as getting approval for facility renovations from zoning boards and review panels. Yet others noted the effects of national politics on local elections, including “a huge upheaval” in city and county government, where officials are being indicted for misuse of funds, and there is “a lot of public mistrust and shifting in transparency in government.” The city may be electing its first African American city manager and sheriff, but “you can feel the heat from national [politics] trickling down ... now you will see big yellow signs that say, ‘Drain the swamp, vote for Republicans.’” A rural presenter takes the middle ground in the debate around the coal industry, between residents who acknowledge its demise to those who firmly believe the coal business will resurge. A few other presenters are optimistic about new, arts-friendly political leaders.

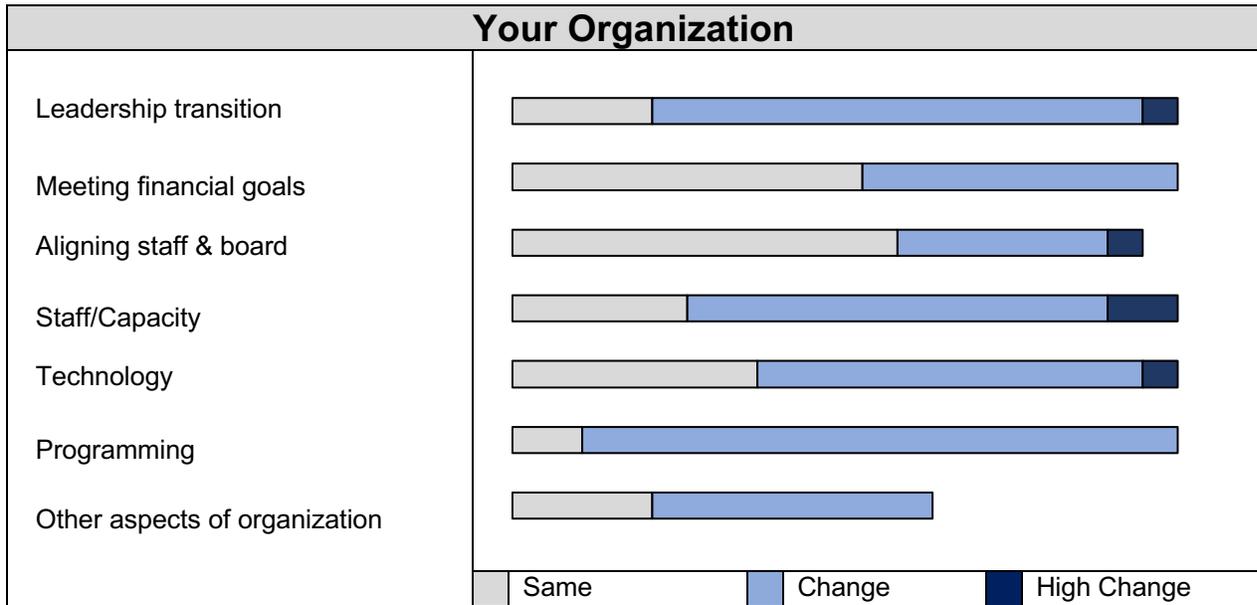
Within discussions about local politics, a theme emerged for community college presenters, as compared to university-based and independent presenters. Community college presenters face upheaval when policies or tax structures change, which can in turn cause massive cuts to their budgets, shifts in governance or staffing, or questions about the value of the arts and why they should be supported with tax or college dollars. One described the community colleges in the state as “not getting the money that they used to.” The way that such shifts affect these presenters’ work is described below in the Leadership section.

## Presenters' Organizational Environments

Presenters were then asked to comment on which aspects of their organizations, within the past five years, have changed and which have remained more or less the same. They could comment on any of the following:

- Leadership changes and any transition that they are, or anticipate, undergoing
- Meeting financial goals and raising funds
- Aligning staff and boards with their vision
- Their overall capacity, including staffing, space, expertise and other areas
- Technology
- Programming, including the art forms and artists they present

**An even higher proportion faced changes within their organizations than within their overall communities.** Nearly all faced transitions in leadership and staffing/capacity, as well as programming. Time did not allow for all topics to be discussed in depth.



## Leadership Transition

**Overall, the independent presenters seem to fare better in aligning leadership and building staff.** The most significant change for one independent presenter was to get the “board more focused on governance and management and for the staff to really do the work that we were hired to do.” For another, the situation is similar, as the board and staff are “totally on board, and have not pushed us in any direction [so it is] a nonissue.” Perhaps related to that, their organizational budgets are stable and not regularly questioned. (The two quoted above have recently opened second spaces.) As a different presenter said, “My position is totally stable. People do not leave; staff have been here for 20-30 years. They love what they do and are well paid.” For another independent that operates out of a city-owned building, “We have a new mayor and she is amazingly supportive ... [and] I have alignment of people in key positions.”

**College and university presenters stressed the ways, and degree to which, leadership changes dramatically alter their work environment.** Due to their placement within large institutions, when leadership changes, presenters may have to start at square one, building relationships with new staff and justifying their budgets or even their existence. Many of the college presenters commented passionately about how having a new president, chancellor or provost threatens their sense of job stability and can lead to questions about their budgets or programs. One explained the ways in which a new hire at the top can sour the attitudes of staff at other levels:

*It feels rudderless with [the] new college president. He overthinks things, and every single week there is a new reorganization. ... It undermines your confidence in the entire organization and why you were doing what you're doing. So, you have to get your intrinsic motivation through your patrons, not your organization. Whoever I report to changes about once a year. None of them get invested in the arts [or] attend.*

At a different community college, a new president “envisions our art center as a way to connect with older voters, who tend to vote ‘no’ for tax issues,” such as increased funding to the college, hoping to make friends and influence votes. This presenter reflected on how the arrival of multiple new deans might play out:

*A huge evolution and culture shift has begun that is going to be interesting. ... When you are a nonacademic unit of an academic institution, you're looked at every time there was a budget cut. I have had five budget cuts in the past seven years. A lot of questions from new deans are, “why are funds that are very limited going to running this program?”*

These leadership transitions influence the dynamics between presenters and academic and other departments, which may be resistant to change and upon which they may rely. One described having “yet another president,” after the previous one incensed faculty, who are still putting in minimal job effort because they “are still mad at the way she treated them.” Even one who endorsed the hire of a new chancellor from outside the institution observed that this leadership change “has significantly helped [but] made a lot of people mad, [though] from a business aspect, it was the right thing to do.” Another faced a similar situation with new president, who brings fresh ideas and is “very enthusiastic and hopeful, [yet college staff] are still trudging along, ready to fight to the death to keep things the same ... there are diehards [saying] this is the way we have always done it.” On the side of optimism was yet a different community college

presenter with a new president, for whom “things are moving in positive way, although our enrollment is down.”

Regardless of the end result of such leadership changes, community college presenters tended to describe the sense of isolation that they commonly feel. As one exclaimed, “Everyone tries to say that you have to be part of the whole [college], but they treat you completely as an outlier and do not provide the support that you need in order to really be a part of the whole.” Several others in community colleges agreed, with one describing how this isolation plays out:

*I am new [and] left to my own devices. My boss is the provost, but I do not see her unless I need help. ...I am starting to feel much more comfortable. But I operate completely by myself. I am in an office across campus ... I do not have anybody to [run ideas past]. You have a faculty committee, but that changes every year.*

Two presenters talked about their plans to retire from long-held jobs, wondering how best to prepare the organization to make the case for its own existence and budget. One wants fellow staff to “become aware of what I do as an administrator, and what I have to navigate ... because we are cogs of a wheel and without those cogs the [arts] environment stops. They need to be aware of the leadership role has to be done on behalf of the organization” in order to ensure its survival.

### Meeting Financial Goals

Broadly speaking, presenters seem to fall within two categories: 1) those that are not currently worried about meeting financial goals because their budgets are set by or dependent on institutions, whose long-term priorities could change; and 2) those whose autonomy allows them to set their own financial goals, including taking risks and expanding operations.

**Surprisingly, a few presenters are not overly concerned with their finances, as their budgets are either covered by their larger institutions, or as a government line item.** One university presenter who ended the year with a \$107,000 surplus explained the reaction by campus administration: “They were all shocked [telling me that] we never thought you would break even. ...Unless you get bailed out because you went in the red, they do not notice.” Another presenter in a community college had similar circumstances: “I have never had to meet a bottom line. So, it is not something I worry about, though I like to be fiscally responsible.” Yet another, an anomaly within this study who receives full support from the government, describes how seeking funding would be perceived of as competition with other arts organizations in the city: “The model is turned on its head with us. That is one of the reasons I took this job [knowing] that I would never have to write a grant.”<sup>7</sup>

**Yet presenters who operate within colleges or government-owned buildings can be at the whims of college administrations and city officials and face funding cuts or shifts in policies.** A presenter in a college whose enrollment dropped had to absorb “a 30% cut in funding, with an expectation that our programming would remain the same.” Challenged to

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<sup>7</sup> For these and other reasons, as stated in the Overview of Respondents section, the budget figures in this small study are disparate and therefore not comparable or generalizable.

“develop ways to reduce our expenses or to change programming...the bottom line is much more of a conversation. And when you have staff capacity that changes, too, those things are ... connected.” When budget cuts happen and colleges “have to decide to get new curtains or maintain an academic department, they choose the academic department.” A presenter at a community college with year-round programming run by a staff of two described how the college environment and decision making affect day-to-day operations and the bottom line:

*With enrollments being down ... [which] happens with a really low unemployment ... state funding has gone down. People keep getting laid off or [the college is] not filling positions. They axed the old director ... and their solution to keep [our programming] going, because they knew [there] would be a political outcry, was to give me [all the work].*

Presenters who receive subsidies may be dedicated, even required, to keep ticket prices low or even free, for audiences, which hinders their ability to generate earned income. One presenter operating out of a building that is owned and maintained by the government struggles to provide affordable ticket prices, turning to rentals to make up the difference. Whether negotiating rental fees or setting ticket prices, “keeping [the venue] affordable is a big deal.”

**Independent organizations seem to be faring better financially than organizations based in community colleges or city-owned facilities.** Nearly all spoke of increased staff, as they expanded facilities, launched capital campaigns, and/or changed or expanded programming. While meeting financial challenges was not easy for them, perhaps their autonomy allowed them to find ways to make decisions and navigate growth and change.

## Programming

**In setting their programming, no real patterns emerged among these presenters, who seemed to employ a wide range of approaches, and booked a plethora of art forms.** They seemed to share a spirit of problem solving to increase attendance, react to challenges and try new things. For some, solving problems meant phasing out long-term events that no longer drew attendance, such as square dances, book clubs or, for several, big bands. For several it meant sticking to “middle-of-the-road programs that would sell tickets.” Most of the independent presenters described intentionally programming in a more socially conscious manner in recent years, though one was “consolidating to get a better bottom line” by shifting to pop and family programming. Another recently began programming off site. A subset of presenters balance presentations with lucrative rentals in order to meet financial goals.

Commonalities were seen in the type of audiences that presenters wished they could reach. **Nearly all presenters expressed a desire to reach audiences who were either younger, more ethnically diverse, or both.** Some of their experiments with programming aimed to reach such audiences. One explained the long-term implications of not taking risks to attract a wider age range:

*It goes back to [the realization] that our audiences are dying off or aging out. So, I am trying to find artists that will attract younger people while not to displacing or angering our older audience members. Sometimes that works and sometimes it does not. But ... the*

*way that our field has done business is no longer going to be sustainable if we just let our audiences die off without replenishing them in some way.*

For one independent, reaching young audiences meant booking artists from Texas, the home state of 40% of the student body at a nearby college, generating attendance that is “off the charts.” For another it was offering “global world music,” in hopes of appealing to younger audiences “who will continue coming as they get older.”

**Some of presenters’ most successful programming efforts involved partnerships with other organizations.** One described successful partnerships with other presenters in the same region to block book dance artists who were new to the area, including Camille A. Brown and Ronald K. Brown (no relation), who had “deep community conversations. . . . Having [these artists] in town can speak to other demographics and build trust and relationships.” A community college told a story of deciding to present *Tres Latinas* by working with Spanish faculty and a Latino Alliance, who came together and agreed on the program: “I wish that could happen more, because it is so fruitful for all.” However, decisions about programming within colleges can raise challenges over turf; while presenters may want to bring artists who complement academic curriculum, professors can be “so territorial, asking, ‘what can [the artist] tell me about my class?’ Professors are the arbiter of what is best for their class or program. . . . Their syllabus is god and they don’t want to diversify it.” Partnerships will be revisited in the audience engagement section below.

Within focus groups there were two areas in which opinions about programming were split. The first was offering free versus low-cost programming. Some stressed the importance of free programming for students or out of commitment to drawing large audiences of all ages. But other presenters have found that attendance is better if they charge for tickets, even if at a low rate. The second area of mixed opinions were around using programming committees. One found a committee helpful while two others found them to be too opinionated and time consuming to manage. Finally, a few commented on how their broader environment influences programming: for two, cold weather limits attendance and for at least one, parking and safety were significant barriers that limit its use of offsite venues.

## **Staffing**

**The independent organizations whose venues had grown had added staff (or soon will) but spoke of their equivocation in doing so.** For the smaller and midsized organizations, “that is a habit with us. We just keep thinking we’ll do the work” ourselves. When one such organization did not “take the time to self-care and grow the organization, we had to play catch up this year, getting the staff to the size we needed to handle the work . . . without going crazy.”

**But most presenters—and again particularly the community colleges—suffer from being chronically understaffed and wearing, as many said, “multiple hats,”** being responsible for everything from booking to marketing to front of house. Several conveyed, with humor, the hats that they wear. A community college presenter had been asked by the staff of a large performing arts center “if I had to go to all our shows, and I was like, uh, yes!” (All other focus group attendees laughed, in acknowledgement that with small staffs there is no choice.) Another presenter simply stated, “I *am* the front of house. My phone number is where you call for tickets.” Yet another government-run organization had dropped from eight to three staff. Even two presenters, who had worked at large venues for many years found that, as one said,

“ironically the workload at larger organizations is usually smaller, per person, because you can hire more easily.” Finally, even if presenters can hire staff, filling positions that must serve multiple functions, such as IT and marketing, means identifying candidates who have multiple skill sets: “Finding one person with that [range] of skills is virtually impossible.”

The end result of being chronically understaffed, and for some underpaid, means that burnout and attrition is common. Hearing criticism about programming exacerbates staff’s sense of burnout. One shared, in frustration, its impact on staff: “We get all the brunt of people when they don’t like the programming, [so staff] get so strung out.” Criticism about programs becomes emotional, as one frankly conveyed: “I am tired, just coming off of the season, and this is really personal, but when there is criticism I want to [hit] people ... who have no idea” how hard it is to program.

## Technology

Commentary about technology was brief, and mostly focused on social media and CRM platforms. For the government or college presenters, social media marketing is often covered by marketing departments within their larger institutions. Some wondered how to get better return for the social media that they did pursue. Others expressed gratitude for technological advances in ticketing systems, CRMs, and other cloud-based administrative systems. A few were anxious about the degree of technological changes, particularly for older staff who struggled to adapt to them. There was one compelling anomaly: a presenter who had tracked a dramatic boost in ticket sales after returning to mailing paper brochures. In the weeks following its mailing, “I can sit and watch the sales hit on the CRM ... because it is hyper local. People [of all ages] called to thank us for it. Around 50% of our ticket sales happen within the [two] weeks after it goes out.”

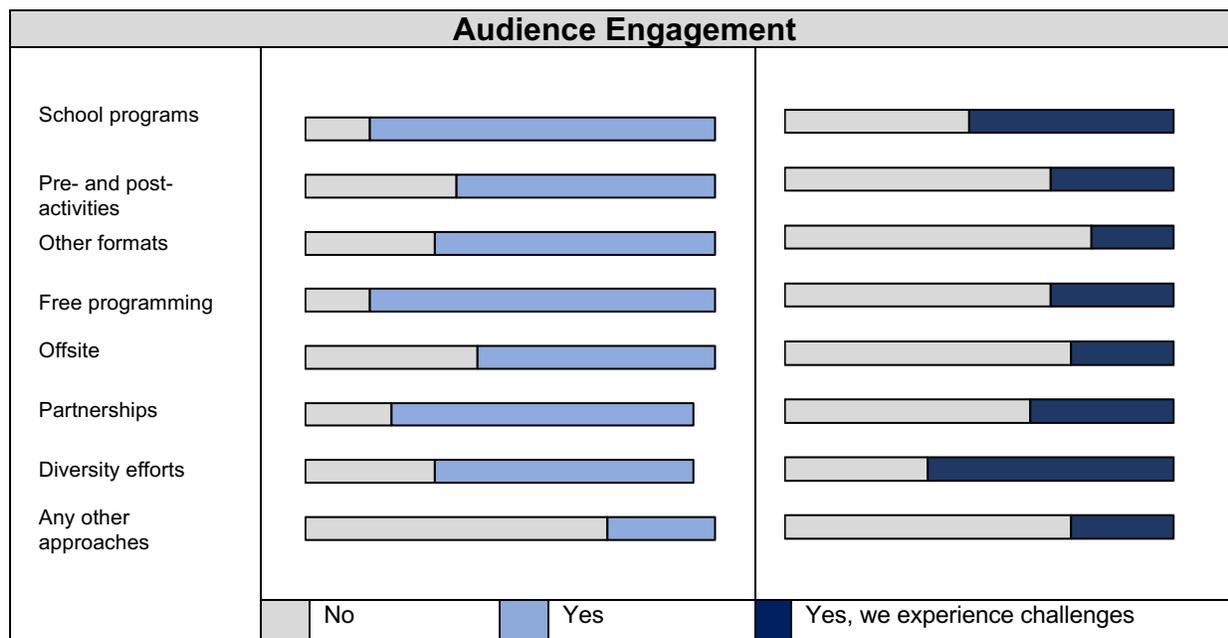
## Audience Engagement

Presenters then discussed how they develop and/or engage their audiences. They first indicated which forms of engagement they offered and then discussed the successes, challenges and changes they had experienced in the past five years. The forms of engagement covered were:

- Programs for schools
- Standard activities such as pre- or post-show talks, Q&As, or open rehearsals
- Other engagement activities, including innovative formats
- Free programming
- Programming at other locations
- Partnerships with social service agencies, community centers, or corporations
- Programs designed specifically to increase the diversity of audiences, by ethnicity, sexuality, disability, or faith

**As the chart below shows, most presenters pursue most engagement strategies and most claim to be committed to trying new approaches.** Nearly all offer school programs and some free programming. The majority offer standard activities, and some have experimented with other engagement formats. Nearly all have pursued partnerships and other efforts to diversify their audiences. The highest challenges—indicated by the dark blue bars on the right—came from presenters’ school programs as well as general efforts to diversify audiences. However, in

their commentary, presenters offered varying views about the importance of audience engagement activities.



### School Programs

Most presenters were dedicated to working with K12 schools in some manner. **For about half of the presenters, school events go as planned and meet their community’s needs.** For one, school programs are a “turnkey operation,” with no challenges, as the city provides a budget for attendance by students from middle and high schools that are ready, accessible and appreciative. Another in a remote location serves as the “middle man” between touring artists and school districts, booking multiple schools that result in longer stays for the artist. A rural presenter told stories about two programs that are funded by the state to bring teaching artists into elementary schools, offering a wide range of art forms from “weaving to origami to printmaking,” but had given up on working with high schools, which were not meeting their financial obligations. The same presenter, in a low-income area, describes why they maintain their commitment to bringing young students to its facility:

*It takes four days to get all elementary schools in. Part of that goal is not just to expose them to diverse programming but to bring them into [our venue]. A lot of kids have not been outside of their community and have not been in a building with an elevator. They come from 45 minutes away, on winding mountain roads.*

**The other half of presenters, however, described the array of challenges they face in attempting to offer and maintain school programs.** The most common barrier was trying to schedule arts events when schools operate in a culture of “teaching to the test,” said about a third of interviewees. One, serving three counties with multiple school districts, recounted the bureaucracy encountered when trying to nail down a schedule: “The biggest school will not let students come on the day the artist was booked.” Others face more complicated challenges; for one in a rural location, “a very large school made the statement that you cannot learn outside of

the classroom.” For another rural presenter, schools have new policies on using busses after getting “sued by someone who said, ‘I should not have to pay for anything outside of education’ and that includes bussing students to my venue.” For a presenter outside of a large city, the “ginormous ... school district makes the federal government look like [it has] no red tape. My biggest challenge is that for every school there is a different entry point [and] each year, it is figuring out how to get in,” which may be the principal, a teacher, or the PTA. An urban presenter spoke of extreme challenges when attempting to work in the city’s school infrastructure, calling it “terrible ... we have to provide everything,” including sounds and lights. “I am not sure if we are impacting anyone.” Finally, others spoke to presentations for students in community colleges, whose student body is less likely to attend, and for a university, whose attendance was low even when shuttle busses have been provided to transport students to events.

## **Pre and Post-show Events and Other Alternatives**

**Opinions were nearly split on the value of offering standard pre- and post-show events.**

**About half of the presenters routinely offered them.** A few mentioned that they felt necessary due to grant requirements, which may not be the best reason and wondered if such events were only prevalent in the performing arts field because funders require them. But the other half either did not offer them or did so rarely; they were asked to share the reasons for their disinterest. **The most common reason for not offering them was that standard pre- and post-events were too labor intensive and provided limited return.** Presenters [particularly at WAA and in the individual interviews] repeatedly described the trade-off between low attendance, versus the cost and amount of labor required to pull them off. This trade-off was particularly prevalent for presenters in organizations with a small staff, who told stories of going to extensive efforts to produce these events, only to have a handful of people attend. As one said, “If it is on a show day, and you were the only person [who attended], it is exhausting.” Another balanced the considerations of the artist, show and goals, which are different for each show: “It would have to be a subject that I think is very important to talk about. If we had the right people in the room, I would be ecstatic. [But] it is very difficult for me to get it to work.” Two mentioned the added cost for the artists’ fee and travel.

**A small but vocal minority of presenters voiced particularly strong objections to offering pre- and post-show events.** Those in rural locations described the mentality of their audiences as the curtain closes: “After the show they want to get out of there.” Another rural presenter explained why: “They have a drive, there are deer on the road, and it could be raining or snowing.” A presenter in an urban location shared a particularly negative view: “I despise them...artists do not like them.” They are hard to pull off, because staff is trying to get people to stay, while also trying to get people out of the facility, and “the people who want to talk are the loudest in the room are not the ones who have the most interesting things to say.” This presenter continued to emphatically describe the barriers, which is why these events are:

*Extremely onerous ... part of the dislike is lower turnout, and also the struggle ... grants want me to do a Q & A. I book artists who are not an easy sell. I am struggling enough just get people to buy the tickets. They won’t stay. Twelve to eighteen people come [and] tend to be people with time on their hands. I want short performances, and [audiences] in and out, and if I have questions, I want to be able to go directly to the artist and not to go in front of a mic.*

Several presenters came up with alternatives that incorporate the needs of their audiences. One of the rural presenters places the talk during intermission, which is “beautiful, as the audience has seen the artist perform, and can ask questions and then the show continues, so there is way more engagement.” The strong opponent above has devised a more successful alternative format of informal, moderated talks in a bar or lounge, drawing an average 35 people; these events “have their own following [and] create their own energy, as opposed to a plus-one energy.”

## Free Events

**Opinions were also split on offering free events.** Some offer “a ton of free programming.” Events that were offered for free or low cost included street festivals and fairs, parades and outdoor concerts; community drop-ins; lectures and community reads; songwriting workshops and cooking classes, and holiday solstice programs. On occasion, these events offer ways to interact with professional artists. One presenter offers all of its programs for free, strongly believing in the community value of free programming. Yet again in most focus groups as well as interviews, questions were raised about the value of offering events for free. One reported having “really bad attendance when it is free. There is that misconception that if it is free, it is not high quality. [Audiences] do not have a stake in it. Another shared the mentality of students, who “tend to think, ‘well I am not out any money, it is cold. or raining or professor did not say I not say I had to go.’”

## Partnerships

*It is a conundrum to take that required audience engagement to another level. For us, the most impactful [engagement strategies] are ones we come up with because we have relationships with the artists, or are thinking out of the box, or putting two artists together in a different way. We have a better return.*

**At all three groups, some the most interesting and passionate discussions were around the forming of partnerships and taking of risks to generate and connect with new audiences.** Interviewees told stories of working with groups that serve veterans or immigrants, libraries, and a range of departments on campuses including world languages, African American studies and film studies, for example.

Colleges offer readily available collaborators in academic departments. One college had just collaborated with its world languages department to translate programs into Spanish for the first time. Several colleges found success in offering documentary films, which allowed them to present ideas about issues such as systemic racism and juvenile justice and, for one, bring in high school film students for dinner and discussion. Even presenters outside of college look to academic departments, such as one who “connected Diavolo to the engineering department and let artists rappel off the top of the library” and had “Tibetan Monks do a mandala [that] was fabulous.”

**Others told stories of matching organizations and engagement ideas to specific communities in mutually beneficial ways.** One received foundation funding for a multi-year partnership with the Guatemalan community, including a “virtual arts festival, so that people could upload their creative work ... we were able to get the national folkloric ballet to come perform....It was a big beautiful project with lots of awesome people participating.” For another,

partnerships with LGBTQ organizations allowed it to recently present its first Pride Festival. Others offered free presentations like bringing opera or Shakespeare to communities, including children. Another works with a local musician, who appeals to families by singing a popular song about pancakes and offers a free pancake brunch. Finally, two mentioned being grateful members of larger, formalized partnerships such as the Jazz Touring Network and the South Arts Dance Touring Initiative. Several presenters pointed out that even other presenting organizations can serve as partners, rather than competition, when they pursue opportunities to co-present.

**Nonetheless, for these small and midsize presenters, their bottom line was the labor needed to pull off such partnerships, which was not usually possible for those with small staffs.**

Most presenters referenced extreme staffing limitations, as documented elsewhere in this report. A rural presenter in a remote part of the country explained prior efforts that seemed to illustrate the limitations of others: “We don’t have a vehicle for innovative formats that fit our region. We don’t have a university community here. People want to hear the music and go home. We tried [things such as] creating exhibits and suggesting book to read and discuss around performances.”

## Dispelling Assumptions

The next discussion aimed to uncover and dispel false assumptions that are made about small and midsized presenting organizations—such as that that they operate identically to large organizations. Presenters were asked how their peers tend to describe them, what was missed or misunderstood about their realities or ways of working and what they wished for other presenters and funders to know about them. This question was asked so that these presenters could correct the record about how they are perceived.

Across focus groups and interviews, presenters’ responses dispelled two such assumptions.

The first assumption centered on agents. **Presenters stressed that agents do not always understand their booking needs and cost structures, which in turn affects all aspects of communication and negotiation, including artist fees and ultimately booking decisions.** Two focus groups became fixated on this issue and several interviewees chimed in as well. Agents tend to talk down to these presenters, using a one-size-fits-all approach of trying to sell them preselected artists, based on limited understanding of these presenters’ markets, audiences, and budgets. One exclaimed a sentiment expressed by many:

*Agents do not understand the changing dynamic from our end....If they are gonna represent their artist to the best of their ability, they need to understand who [the] market is, [the number of] seats, what their [artist’s] marketability is, and what kind of ticket price you can use.*

**Across focus groups and interviews, the most frequently mentioned misassumption was agents’ tendency to pitch artists who are either too expensive or otherwise inappropriate for presenters’ budget and market.** As one explained, “Agents do not understand the economics of small theaters. If you price your shows too high for our small venues, we cannot book them, and you miss out!” If agents thought more about presenters’ size and market, they “could package [shows] in a way that provides “a lot more work for your artists.” This concern was heightened among community colleges who have “less and less money but agents don’t realize it....They do not understand our market [and] think we are richer than we are.” As an

independent, Midwestern presenter urged, “Tell the agents that we do not have subscriber base, we only have single tickets. When you pitch me a show, it has to sell on its own merit.”

At the other end of the spectrum were a few presenters in this study, who stressed that agents lack awareness of their ambitious interests and the larger fees they can pay. As one based in a city described, “There are opportunities that the larger agents miss. [Your artists] can come to a 500-seat venue and do a boutique show. There are absolutely 500 people in [my city] who will pay \$80 for Leanne Rhimes!” Only the large presenters are offered such artists. Another adds that agents should tailor their pitch to each presenter’s interests, which may be different than assumed: “Very frequently agents at APAP turn away, as they don’t assume I have the budget that I have. I have to explain that ... I want to bring the thought leaders and I will pay for it. That is the bias against the word ‘community’” in the title of presenters’ organization names. However, there were a few exceptions; this same presenter had cultivated relationships with “enough agents who know what I do and are eager to have their clients [come to my space].” Another told a positive story about how an agent helped with a block booking arrangement, including dropping the price for the artist. APAP was urged to address this mismatch between agents’ assumptions, as played out in their pitches and artist recommendations, and presenters’ real—and varying—circumstances.

The second false assumption related to presenters’ roles in their communities. **These presenters are, as one said, “small and mighty”—meaning they operate with limited capacity yet are committed to presenting artists and programs of quality.** This “small and mighty” theme was consistent across all focus groups and most interviews. **The “small” notion was reflected in a recurring theme that these presenters wear “multiple hats”; typically operating with a very small staff, they are responsible for covering all aspects of presentations.** Laughter erupted in one focus group when a presenter alluded to how their wearing of many hats played out on a regular basis: “like when you get the rider, about who to contact” for which aspects of the booking, because it is all the same person. Another shared feeling insecure by being small, “but then you realize you are doing the ED and marketing jobs ... and that you are capable.” A humorous idea emerged in one focus group, when a participant referred to the APAP Major University Presenters group, known as the MUPs, and suggested that “we need a group called the MIPs, or Mostly Insignificant Presenters.” Others wholeheartedly agreed.

**The “mighty” part plays out in these presenters’ abilities to manage budgets, know their communities, present successful events and navigate their challenges.** Presenters wished that agents in particular, but also others in the field including presenters and funders, would understand that, as one stressed, “Small presenters can make a dollar go farther than anybody else. ... The impact on our communities is so much deeper and richer than a large presenter and goes beyond our community.” Another, from a different focus group, adds: “local people are so amazed at what [we] can do here because we are in a rural area. We bring in really well-known [artists].” Yet another agreed, “[Others] do not recognize the quality of what we do.”

Several told stories about how their mightiness plays out in practice. For one it meant not assuming that the free events they offer are less successful: “Because our programs are free of charge, there is sometimes a perception that they are somehow of less quality. We have 4,000-7,000 people at every single concert. That is not lost on our community.” Several others, stressed the ways in which they are aware of, and connected to, their communities. As one in a midsized city explained:

*We are [assumed to be] a ‘great community organization’ but not presenting art at highest caliber. [Yet] the community connections we have lead [us to present] artists of the highest caliber. The quality of events we provide, and energy produced, are unmatched even at [other venues that charge] higher prices. We find artists through local connections. The work we do creating partnerships elevates the event even further. So, if I bring ... a salsa band that might not sell 600 seats at a large art center... because they are an amazing group and since we did the legwork to get the Puerto Rican people in [my location] and others, it creates an energy that is palpable—a sweaty, crazy event.*

Other areas of misconception were expressed by only a few. One issue was about their wealth. Two presenters wondered if, due to the high caliber and costs of artists they present, and because they, as one said, are “not afraid to drop some money on acts, people think we are richer than we are.” For the other, the false perception of wealth may exist because all events are offered for free, which is only possible because donors “have given so generously.” The other misconception was about rural life in general. A rural presenter wished that arts peers could be enlightened about what it truly means to work in rural locations, including transportation challenges, low wages, opioid addiction and lack of access to art and education: “They don’t understand how truly, deeply, rural we are and what the challenges are.... It takes a long time to get here ... that really makes people stop and think about [whether they should attend events]. I have artists who are incensed that they cannot get a direct flight here.”

## Needs

In the concluding questions, presenters were asked broadly about their needs—what they most want to learn or have or do that would make them stronger or help them do their jobs better. Rather than respond with the common answer of “more funding,” presenters were required to specify how they would use such funding if they had it. They were further asked what APAP might offer them, either within or outside of its conference.

Before addressing the question, however, **half of all presenters took the opportunity to politely but firmly convey to APAP that its Annual Conference is cost prohibitive for them.** Several described the financial machinations they utilize to get to New York, including using spouses’ travel benefits and skipping registration. As one explained, “I go sometimes because my husband travels so ... I use miles, find a cheap hotel and do not register for the conference.” Two have found alternatives through the regional conferences that serve their needs. The array of financial circumstances included—especially for small presenters based in large institutions such as community colleges—lacking a travel budget, or not being granted permission to use limited travel funds for a conference. They asserted that the conference was for large presenters and did not meet their needs. While these presenters did not ask outright for financial subsidies, they wanted to make their views known to APAP. It may be important to note that the presenters who do attend the conference value it; one told a detailed story of how. Rather than attend showcases or seek professional development, this presenter will garner “ideas from keynotes and plenaries [and] develop and maintain lasting interactions with agents that allow for booking an entire season,” and over the years has “found some of the most fascinating performers that I would not have found on my own. I work that conference.”

Then, as might be anticipated, the smallest organizations tended to immediately ask for more staff. Following that, the conversations identified three needs.

**1. Across discussions and interviews, presenters’ most common and passionate theme was for what several called a cohort, or way for like-sized presenters to meet, share information, discuss similar issues, and solve common problems.** One explained the value of such a group, as expressed by many other presenters: “If I had a group of people I could connect with either virtually or once per year who were in my same shoes, or very similar situations, I think we could learn a lot from one another.”

Focus groups did not allow for significant time to discuss the format that such a cohort might take; there seemed a general understanding that all or part of its interaction might be online. Though not the consensus, some interest was expressed in keeping the cohort small, either by subdividing members by budget size or other factors (such as those based in community colleges, rural settings or cities, for example) or rotating members annually. The point was to design a structure that would provide quality one-on-one interaction, rather than create yet another large conference gathering. As one specified, “Keep it relatively small, 10-15 people, so that everyone gets to participate.” One envisioned it working well “if it were online and topic related, and if it relates to, say, your size, and [you] let people talk, similar to this focus group.” Another imagined the potential of such a cohort:

*How do we facilitate communication with presenters of the same size? Even if we just had a monthly video conference ... of people with organizations of relatively similar sizes working in relatively similar communities. It is support—networking in a way that does not require me to get to [a large city] but that levels the playing field. That could be really interesting.*

From such a cohort, presenters felt they might gain relationships with peers and mentors. One referenced the structure of the APAP fellows’ program, which offers its recipients ways to meet on a regular basis. A few wondered if the gathering of community college presenters, which they thought existed during an earlier time, might be reinstated, and a few asked if, during APAP’s annual conference, there might be a track for smaller presenters.

Though there was no consensus, topics mentioned by at least one presenter that such a cohort might address were: the challenges of owning and operating buildings; issues that arise in rural presenting; self-care and work-life balance for staff; and dealing with interoffice dynamics and challenges among small staff. Another referenced the value of each presenter developing a “kitchen cabinet,” or small group of peers to which they could turn to for information of all kinds and wondered if a cohort might allow for such connections to be built. Two wondered if block booking might be possible. An independent presenter requested that sales data be shared, so that similar presenters could know attendance and income figures for comparable venues. Finally, a longtime presenter recalled from long ago the APAP presenter reports, which were mailed to members and provided feedback on residencies and working with specific artists, wondering if that information might again be shared in some manner.

**2. Whether within or outside of such a cohort, about one third of presenters longed for new ideas and strategies to help them expand their own thinking about ways to work in their communities.** Whether this expanded thinking might be about specific programs, or residency design, the commonality seemed to be how to develop and engage audiences, including overcoming their limited mindsets and lack of interest in taking risks on performances. The

following three comments illustrate the depth of these presenters' vision, and questions they were asking, as well as their range of needs, based on their context, including location and organizational structure.

A community college presenter longed to learn how to engage students in meaningful arts experiences:

*I want to get students to come ... off their phones, off their computers, and out of Netflix and ESPN.... There is nothing like a live performance or live speaker. We are bringing Pulitzer Prize winners and well-known artists ... I want them to come experience something new. Maybe they don't know about it, but they can learn.... It is free, I will drive you on the shuttle, and I will get you home, and it will take only two hours....[When I started my job] I wanted to come in and shake things up and show marked gains, which has not happened yet.*

A rural presenter wondered about drawing fresh ideas for audience engagement from either comparable organizations in other locations or perhaps presenters based in cities:

*[It would be valuable to have] a mentor or someone who is in the thick of it who is saying ... this is something really cool going on. I could find stuff on the internet, but don't have the time to, [so I need] help with thinking creatively ... to engage audiences. I am not convinced that audiences want to be engaged more, and I think we are doing a pretty good job. But ... [based on the structure of other successful models], if you could create a similar regional or rural network, where people could come together, and you could bring in presenters from more urban areas who could help you brainstorm.*

Finally, an urban presenter longed for a way to address “the generational divide in paying for tickets,” and explained:

*There needs to be more work [within our field] communicating to audiences the value of performance ... Audiences are highly scattered, or only looking at the thing they know. They don't try new things....There is too much information out there....We thrive when there are enough people out there who say, “I will give that a shot.” ... I want to book the shows that are hard sells and convince audiences that [they] will be amazing.*

Regardless of the format and topics, the thread throughout was consistent, as another articulated: “That forum where I can dive down to what it is that is keeping me up at night and find out that everyone is in the same boat, or that there is a solution I missed.”

**3. Presenters expressed a need that, while less specific or directly beneficial, was nonetheless important to them. They wished that APAP could advocate for their value,** as well as for the value of the arts overall. Across focus groups and interviews, there was some sense that presenters and funders in other locations did not understand the value of smaller presenters, and instead relied on assumptions, or what one said was “just the rural stereotype.” Another corrected the record on what was referred to as “coastal snobbery,” saying: “You can be small and sophisticated. We all have certain standards because we are part of this industry.” Though interviewees program differently, this same presenter felt that, “Everyone here is a professional and there is a fineness to what they do that could carry over to other venues.” Another agreed: “I know exactly what I can do where I am. Just trust me, I know quality.” Another in the South agreed in making programming decisions about adventurous artists,

knowing exactly how far audiences can, and cannot, be pushed. Yet another underscored the importance of such advocacy:

*We are bringing real value to our communities. We are small, we are vulnerable, we need these things sometimes more than our colleagues in larger organizations and communities. We represent the diversity, and the grassroots ... but I don't think we have that respect, [or] connection to large funders, [or] access to resources.*

Finally, a presenter who brought a unique perspective from working in both large and small organizations explained the heightened role of the latter:

*If [the large] organization disappeared, it would be a blip on the radar. If my [small, current] organization disappeared it would be a huge loss to the community. That underscores the value that I have been trying to communicate to funders and administrators [who] don't get the impact that smaller organizations have....My perception has been that the major funders have been funding major presenters....People who don't have experience ... may be in positions of judgment. [When agents visit my venue] they all walk away saying "Oh my goodness, this is really [good]." That is why I want to tell our stories.*

## Recommendations

From this research, the following are offered for APAP's consideration.

### **Consider administering a larger-scale quantitative study of small and midsized presenters.**

Typically, formative qualitative research of the type conducted for this report provides rich insight and content for large studies, which help determine if the initial findings hold true for the larger population—in this case small- and medium-sized presenters. Provided it is designed according to commonly-accepted research standards, incorporates culturally responsive approaches, and its respondents are representative of the field, such a study could illuminate trends within the presenting field. The consultant offers initial questions that such a study might address:

- What is the general distribution of small and midsized presenters across the country (or at least those that APAP can identify and access)? What are their organizational structures?
- How are their budgets structured? To what degree do their budgets differ from their larger counterparts? In what ways are their true costs and capacity hidden from their budgets, such as with college presenters who utilize campus spaces as well as staff in other departments?
- To what extent do presenters within institutions face budget cuts or have to justify to their existence?
- What are these presenters' staff sizes, and how does that influence or limit their capacity or ability to make change?
- What demographic patterns exist within their communities? How have these patterns changed? What are any impacts of those demographics on these presenters' work, including their perceptions of who they should be reaching?
- What proportion are affected by patterns of gentrification, as described in this report?
- To what degree does the current political climate, as well as longstanding beliefs within presenters' communities, influence their decision making, programs and strategies, as well as their measures of success?
- What are any patterns of audience development and engagement? For example, what are their opinions about post-show events and what alternatives have they found to reflect their audiences' needs?
- To what degree are their audiences aging out of attendance? What are any workable solutions that have been found to cultivate younger audiences?
- What are any other patterns of change they have experienced, including challenges or opportunities?
- What might be learned about the assumption that refugee and other audiences keep to themselves? How might presenters challenge themselves to cultivate relationships with audiences who are newer to their area or less comfortable in their facilities?

APAP's success at addressing these questions will depend on its ability to identify and access these presenters, which may involve collaborating with others such as the regional arts organizations.

**Consider piloting a cohort for small and medium-sized presenters.** Interviewees from this study might advise APAP on the goals, structure and location for meetings, including whether online or in person, and topics to be pursued.

**Explore whether APAP might pilot either a track or offer select sessions for small and midsized presenters at its annual conference.** Their perception is that the conference is designed to serve only the largest presenters. In order for such a track to succeed these smaller presenters would need to be able attend the conference. Given their financial barriers, including both travel costs and travel time, subsidy may be necessary.

**Share the stories and realities of small and midsized presenters with others in the field.** The learning from this study should be shared with funders and others in the field to help adjust their assumptions. Specifically, audience engagement practices that work within large organizations may not work in smaller ones.

**The learning from this report might inform a larger response, such as a funding initiative.** Thought launching such a program would be ambitious, it might address some of the needs expressed in this report. These presenters might receive support to address one of their requests—to pursue ideas and strategies that expand their own thinking about working in their communities. It might cover travel costs for cohort meetings. And it could heighten awareness of their existence, tell their stories and provide models for others, including funders, who wish to better understand or support similar organizations or issues.

There is, however, an important overlay: in the design of any solutions, these presenters' limited staff capacity must be addressed. They will only benefit from these solutions if they are able to participate in them.

## **Appendix A. Focus Group Participants and Interviewees**

Camille Barigar, College of Southern Idaho, Twin Falls, ID

Ronda Billerbeck, City of Kent Arts Commission, Kent, WA

Gwethalyn Bronner, College of Lake County, Grayslake, IL

Nicole Cotton-Leachman, Faulkner Performing Arts Center - University of Arkansas,  
Fayetteville, AR

Lynn Creamer, Carnegie Hall, Lewisburg, WV

Firouzeh Forouzmand, Las Vegas-Clark County Library District, Las Vegas, NV

Carolyn Franks, Northeast Texas Community College, Mt. Pleasant, TX

Rae Geoffrey, Diana Wortham Theater, Asheville, NC

Wendi Hassan, Cache Valley Center for the Arts, Logan, UT

Janet Herman Barlow, Stocker Arts Center/Lorain County Community College, Elyria, OH

Josh Kohn, Creative Alliance, Baltimore, MD

James Lemons, Lake Placid Center for the Arts, Lake Placid, NY

Charles Leslie, Community Concert Hall at Fort Lewis College, Durango, CO

Peg MacDonald, Defiance Community Cultural Council, Defiance, OH

Paul Mechnewicz, Reston Community Center, Reston, VA

Beverly Noerr, Redlands Bowl Summer Music Festival, Redlands, CA

Joshua Steele, Memorial Hall, Cincinnati, OH

Amy Wagliardo, Gorton Community Center, Lake Forest, IL

Lisa Watson, Wittenberg Series at Wittenberg University, Springfield, OH

## Appendix B. The Wallace Foundation: Effective Practices for Audience Engagement

Excerpted from Harlow, Bob. *The Road to Results: Effective Practices for Building Arts Audiences*. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2014. p. ix – xii.

1. **Recognizing When Change Is Needed.** Organizations saw a pattern of audience behavior that presented an opportunity or a challenge for their financial viability, artistic viability, or both. They recognized that change was necessary to seize this opportunity or overcome the challenge. In some cases, the urgency of the challenge or opportunity actually served the initiative by keeping it front and center, capturing and sustaining the attention of the entire organization over the years needed to build a following.
2. **Identifying the Target Audience that Fits.** Compatibility has two meanings here: First, organizations had reason to believe, based either on research or prior experience, that they could make a meaningful connection with the target audience. Second, leaders agreed that serving the audience reinforced—and did not compromise—the organization’s other activities or its mission.
3. **Determining What Kinds of Barriers Need to Be Removed.** Successful organizations identified the types of barriers impeding the target audience’s participation and shaped their strategies accordingly.
4. **Taking Out the Guesswork: Audience Research to Clarify the Approach.** Organizations often started out knowing very little about the new audience they were targeting and why that audience was not participating. Rather than guess, they went to the source—the target audience itself—for the facts. Using audience research, the organizations gained a clearer understanding of their target group’s interests, lifestyles, general attitudes toward the arts, cultural involvement, and opinions of their own institution.
5. **Thinking Through the Relationship.** Some case study organizations went so far as to spell out a vision of the relationship they wanted to cultivate with the new audience, including specific roles for the audience and themselves. By doing so, they gave their audience-building initiatives structure and a sense of purpose. Leaders and staff members understood how they wanted the audience to interact with their organization and developed programs to fulfill that vision.
6. **Providing Multiple Ways In.** Staff expanded the ways people could access their organizations both literally and psychologically. Many organizations provided gateway experiences to acquaint newcomers with their activities. Others generated interest by making connections to things that their target audience already knew or by showing them different sides of their institutions.
7. **Aligning the Organization Around the Strategy.** Leaders and staff built clarity, consensus, and internal buy-in around the audience-building initiative’s objectives, importance to the organization, and staff roles in implementing it.
8. **Building in Learning.** Even with considerable research and planning, organizations could never be sure that a new audience would react favorably to their overtures. There were stops, starts, and some downright failures along the way. To stay on track and develop a working knowledge of what clicked with their audiences, many of them did on-the-ground experiments or used formal evaluations that drove program improvements.
9. **Preparing for Success.** Success for the 10 organizations involved serving new audiences and assuming new responsibilities. Staff often worked overtime to handle an increased workload. Organizations found that they had to develop new capabilities and refine existing practices to accommodate newcomers, all while continuing to satisfy existing audiences.

## Appendix C. Company Profile and Consultant Bio

Callahan Consulting for the Arts helps artists, arts organizations, and funders realize their vision through services including strategic planning, development, evaluation, research, and philanthropic counsel. Founded by Suzanne Callahan in 1996, the firm has expanded over the past 20 years to include strategic partnerships with senior consultants as well as freelance writer/administrators. Based in Washington, D.C., and with a national presence, the firm has worked with a wide and growing client base of small to midsized arts ensembles, large institutions, presenting organizations, foundations, and national associations. With a long history of running funding programs, the firm manages Dance/USA's Fellowships to Artists, and formerly managed its Engaging Dance Audiences, and its National College Choreography Initiative, (a component of the NEA's American Masterpieces program). Among its philanthropic clients are the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The firm's recognition has grown over the past two decades. Founder Suzanne Callahan is a regular trainer, college educator, panelist, and speaker. Her book *Singing Our Praises* received a major national award and she has been published in the areas of fundraising, planning, and philanthropy. The firm was approved to join the consultant rosters for the National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers (NCCG) and the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone (UMEZ). The firm has conducted major studies of arts-related issues and dance communities in cities across the United States to inform funders' policy decisions. Studies for The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, as well as other funders, have involved extensive research on choreographic training, the arts field's use of technology, and dance communities across the country.

Callahan Consulting for the Arts offers its clients a wealth of experience in national policy and philanthropy; professional certification and documented success in fundraising; graduate-level training and trend-setting expertise in evaluation; and a thorough approach to assessment and strategic planning. Most importantly, the firm prides itself on its impressive track record of accomplishment and concrete results in its key service areas, and the strong and trusting relationships that it has developed with clients.

### **Suzanne Callahan, CFRE (Founder)**

Callahan brings nearly 30 years' experience as a national funder, having served as Senior Specialist for the Dance Program at the National Endowment for the Arts and run national funding initiatives for Dance/USA. At the NEA she received a Distinguished Service Award for her leadership as Chair to the agency's AIDS Working Group and for her efforts to address the issues of AIDS and health insurance for artists. Callahan is an author and frequent lecturer in arts evaluation at national and regional conferences. Her book *Singing Our Praises: Case Studies in the Art of Evaluation*, published by the Association of Performing Arts Professionals, was awarded Outstanding Publication of the Year from the American Evaluation Association (AEA). Her evaluation writings have been published in the *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader*, and *Chronicle of Philanthropy* as well as the journals of national arts service organizations. Evaluations conducted by her firm have focused on the creative process and audience engagement, as well as projects involving the intersection of arts with social justice, service delivery, education, philanthropy, and healthcare. Callahan has served as panelist or site visitor for numerous foundations and associations and on advisory committees for the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, the Society for Arts in Healthcare and Dance Metro DC. A former dance teacher, Callahan holds an M.A. in Dance Education and a Certificate in Fundraising from George Washington University (GWU), where she also studied evaluation and anthropology, and a B.A. from Northwestern University. She has studied evaluation at The Evaluators Institute (TEI), the American Evaluation Association (AEA), the Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA), and directly with some of the foremost experts in the field, including Michael Quinn Patton and Richard Krueger. She trained in facilitating communities of practice with Etienne Wenger. She has been a guest lecturer at numerous universities and an adjunct professor at GWU. She conceived of and produced the Dance/USA book *Dance from the Campus to the Real World (and Back Again): A Resource Guide for Artists, Faculty and Students*. Both of her books are used as college texts.