CREATIVE STATES COALITION

Making the Case: Practical Arts Advocacy

Levitt Family Foundation Grantees

October 27, 2026

By: Claire Rice, Nate McGaha, Alejandra Duque Cifuentes

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Creative States Coalition

Mission

To serve as a **coalition of state-level arts and culture advocacy organizations** that initiate, support, strengthen, and elevate action for arts sector growth at the state and local level through collaboration, education, capacity building, and public policy development.

Vision

A United States where every state is backed by a ***sustainable, collaborative arts and culture advocacy coalition*** that prioritizes justice in building a robust, equitable, and culturally aware society.

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Who is CSC?

The Creative States Coalition includes:

- 30+ state/local arts advocacy organizations
- 20 local/intra-state organizations
- 5+ national/regional organizations
- 6 funding partners

Together we make up **50+ different arts and cultural advocacy efforts** in the United States.

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Agenda

I. **The Current Moment**
- Context for creative advocacy across the US
- Key definitions

II. **Preparing for Advocacy**
- Case Study
- Getting Ready

III. **Public Narrative: Building Your Story**
- Story of Self
- Story of Us
- Story of Now

IV. **Legislation and Navigating**
- Having the Conversation
- Methodology and Planning
- Arts Intersections

V. **Closing**

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The Current Moment:
Context

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The Current Moment: Why advocate now?

- Prime time for Municipal Budgets for 2027

- November 3 midterm elections next week
  - Guidance for nonpartisan advocacy activity
  - Plan for introducing themselves to newly elected officials.

- Importance of state and local advocacy
  - Federal: NEA again challenged
  - More funding and potential in state and local conversations



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Arts & Culture and Levels of Government Funding

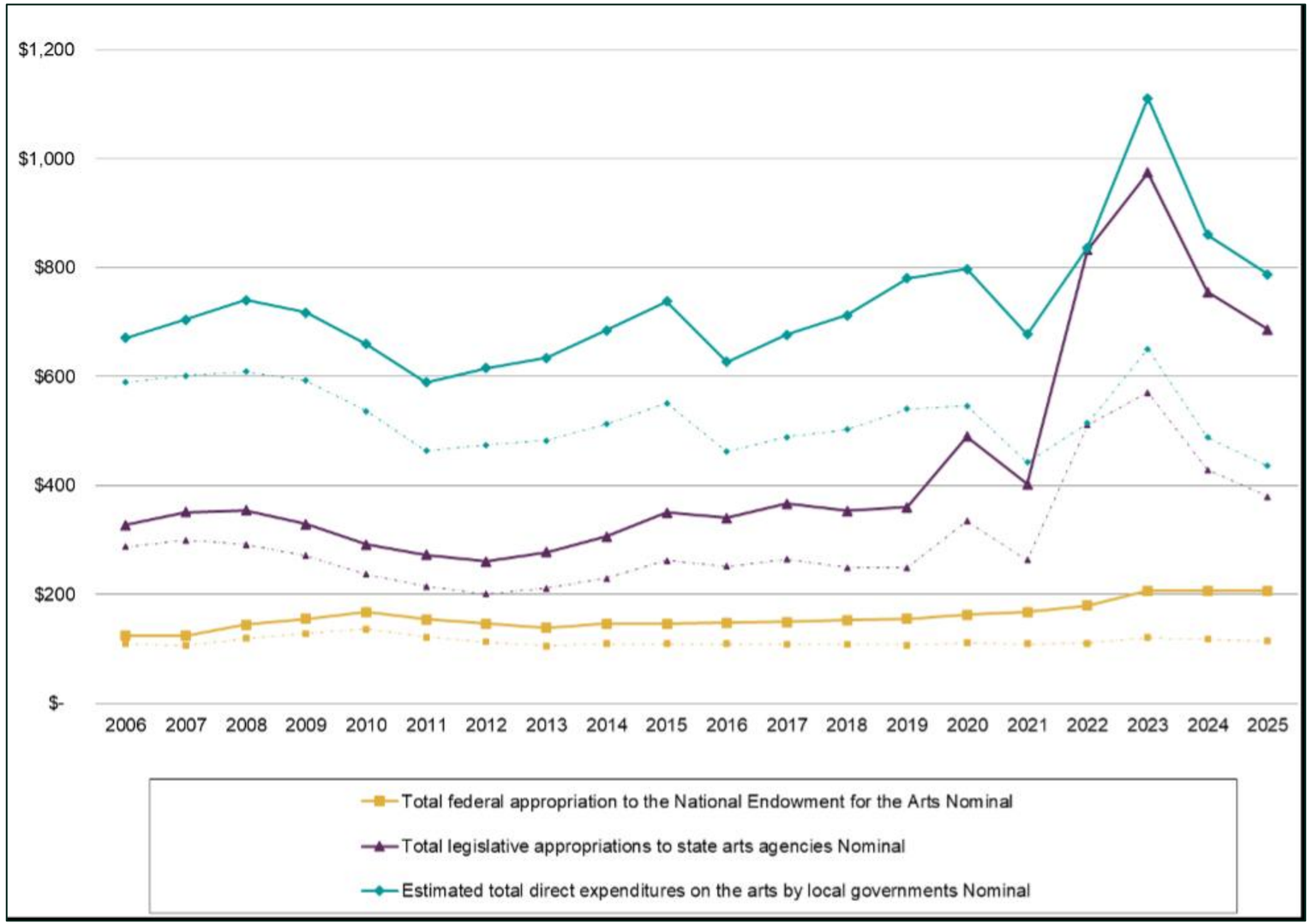
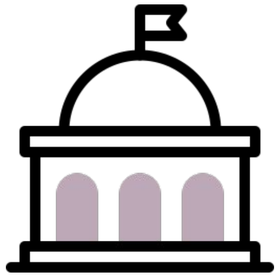


FIGURE 1.
Federal, State, and Local Government Arts Funding, Nominal and Inflation-Adjusted Dollars, 2005-2025

Source: National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

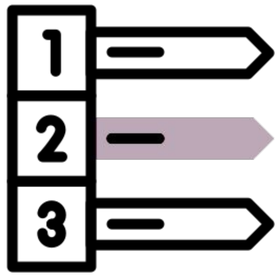
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Examples of Cultural Policy Opportunities Across Levels of Government



FEDERAL

- National Endowment for the Arts
- IRS tax designation



STATE

- State arts agencies
- Tax designation
- Line items
- Lodging tax revenue
- Workforce Development

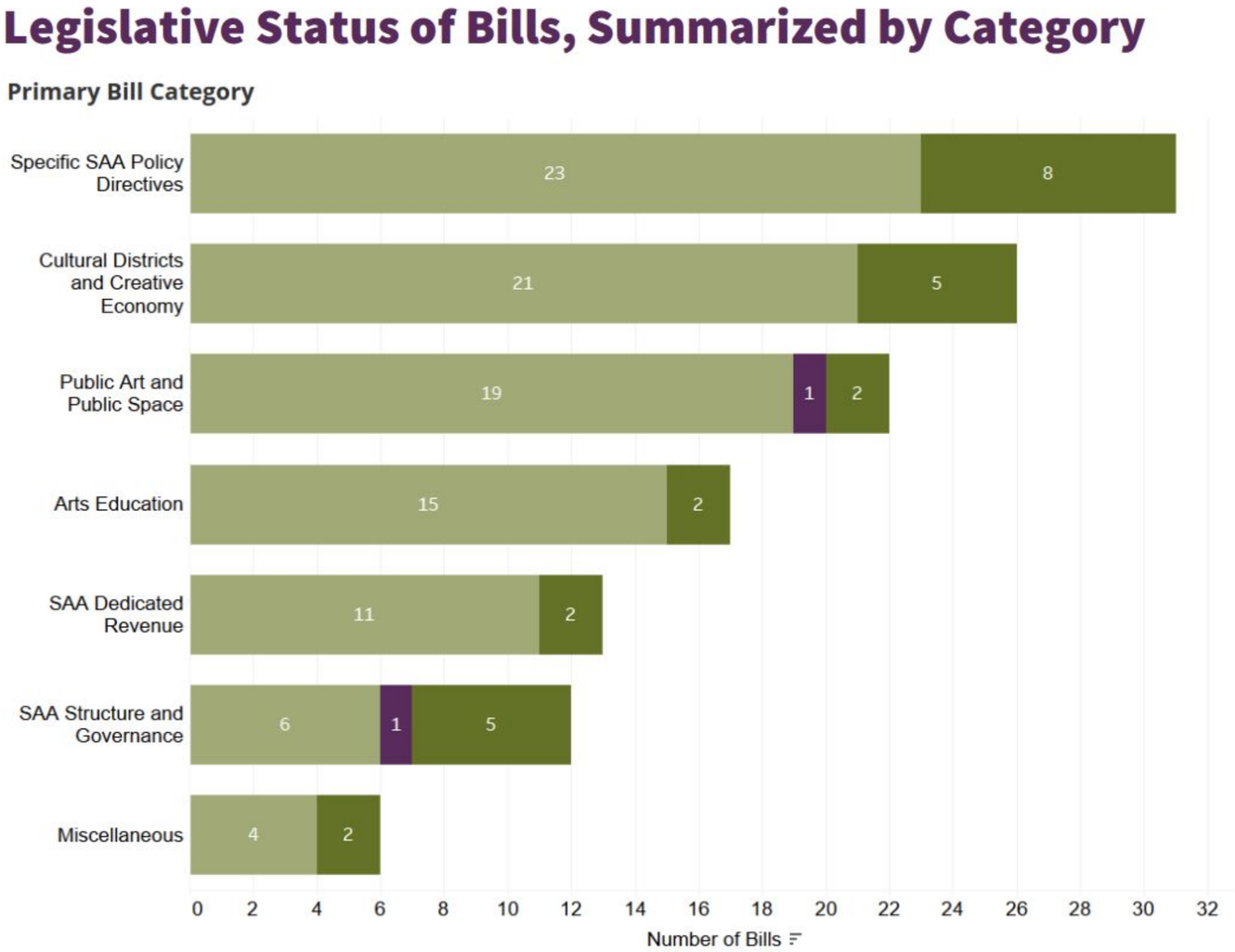


COUNTY/MUNICIPAL

- Local arts agencies
- Public art
- Tax allocations
- Permitting
- Zoning
- Cultural districts

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State Cultural Policy Landscape (April 2026)



Source: National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

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Preparing for Advocacy: Definitions and Case Study

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Let’s first assess our comfort with advocacy…

Agree



Not Sure



Disagree



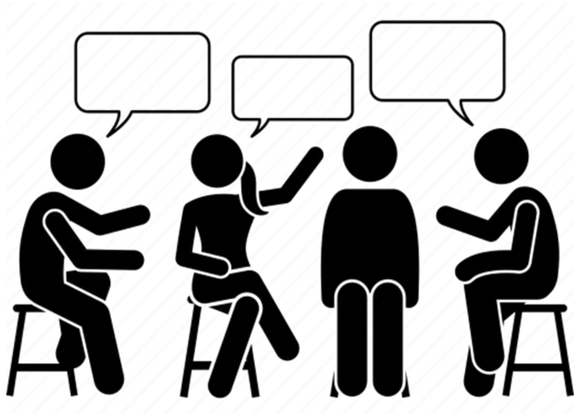
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Let’s first assess our comfort with advocacy…

- I feel very comfortable advocating for myself.
- I feel more comfortable advocating for other people or my organization than I do for myself.
- Issues like food and housing are more important than arts and culture.
- I’m afraid I don’t know enough about public policy and will sound uninformed
- I feel overwhelmed that the problems are just too big and complex to actually solve.
- It’s difficult to find time to advocate.
- I believe in the power of collective action and organizing to make change.

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Advocacy Definitions



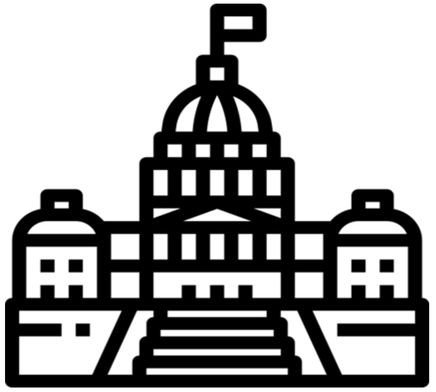
LOBBYING

Direct engagement with policymakers to influence and/or shape specific legislation, regulations, or government decisions.



ELECTIONEERING

Efforts/activities by a person or organization to persuade voters to support or oppose specific candidates, political parties, or ballot issues in an upcoming election.



ADVOCACY/ EDUCATION

The act of promoting, educating about, or advancing a cause to influence public awareness, opinion, or decision-making.

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Lobbying

Direct engagement with policymakers to influence and/or shape specific legislation, regulations, or government decisions.

- **Direct lobbying**: communicating directly with an elected official to convince them regarding a piece of legislation; or

- **Grassroots lobbying**: encouraging others to contact their legislators or take action on a ballot measure.

Allowed for 501(c)(3)s, but it must not be a "substantial" part of their activities (5% or less of your time/money is safe). No limits on trying to influence executive branch or judicial actions.

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Electioneering

Efforts/activities by a person or organization to persuade voters to support or oppose specific candidates or political parties.

✓ **YES**: Nonpartisan events such as forums are allowed, provided certain provisions are met.

✘ **NO**: 501(c)(3) organizations may never endorse or work to support or oppose a candidate for elected office.

Example of electioneering:

- Displaying campaign signs, distributing literature, or directly soliciting votes for or against a person or party

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Advocacy / Education

The act of promoting, educating about, or advancing a cause to influence public awareness, opinion, or decision-making.

✓ **YES**: Can include sharing of information, teaching about an issue, etc.

✘ **NO**: There are no limits on 501(c)(3)'s engaging in activities that educate the public about policy issues, including saying why one policy is better than another.

Example of Advocacy/Education:

- "A universal charitable deduction is necessary. It will encourage more giving."

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Key Considerations

Not one-size-fits all:

- The best way to approach lobbying-vs-advocacy issues is case by case

Determine your organizational strategy:

- Evaluate your organization's various actions in their individual nature
- Consider how those individual actions tell an overall story of your orgs activity and work

Example Resources:

- Your state arts advocacy organization - Creative States Coalition
- Alliance for Justice/Bolder Advocacy: Practical Guidance for Nonprofits

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Key Considerations

Everyone can advocate!:

- Policy advocacy
- Personal advocacy

Many different goals:

- Changing legislation
- Organizing Neighbors/community
- Building relationships with a variety of civic leaders

Many different versions of success

- Different kind of “wins”

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Case Study

2019:
- Arts Council defines **advocacy as a need**.
- Began **conversations** with officials.

2020:
- Community advocacy **training** by Arts NC.
- **Coordinated** local arts pandemic response.
- **Advocated** for local arts relief.
- Built **relationships** with officials.
- Began local arts **candidate surveys**.
- **Organized** regional arts councils.

2021:
- Secured local ARPA **arts funding**.
- Created "**Creative Jobs**" economic report.
- Organized "**Arts Coalition**" across 10 local creative sectors.

ArtsAVL in Asheville, NC



Images left to right, top to bottom:
Arts Candidate Forum, Community Mural, Art project in flood-ravaged River Arts District, opening of new facility for Toe River Arts in Yancey County, NC

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Case Study

2022- - Starts annual “**State of the Arts Brunch**.”

2023: - Hosts three **arts candidate forums**

- City, county, and state.

- County funding **1200% increase**.

- $15,000 to $185,000.

- **City partnership** for event grants

- Solved event staffing issues.

2024- - Arts AVL **leads regional Helene recovery**.

2026:

- **Regional grants** to artists and orgs.

- **Impact reports** for entire region.

- “**Arts Recovery Framework**” for County

- City/County government funded.

- Framework in **Governor’s recovery plan**.

ArtsAVL in Asheville, NC



Images left to right, top to bottom:
Arts Candidate Forum, Community Mural, Art project in flood-ravaged River Arts District, opening of new facility for Toe River Arts in Yancey County, NC

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Getting Ready to Advocate

01	GOAL	What do you want? What is the problem you are trying to solve or the outcome you want to achieve?
02	TARGET	Who has power?
03	TIMELINE	Is there a specific timeline when decisions are being made related to your goal?
04	CASE	Why does your goal matter? Who is it impacting?
05	MESSAGING	What are the most persuasive arguments in your favor?
06	PERSONAL STORY	What is your connection to this goal?

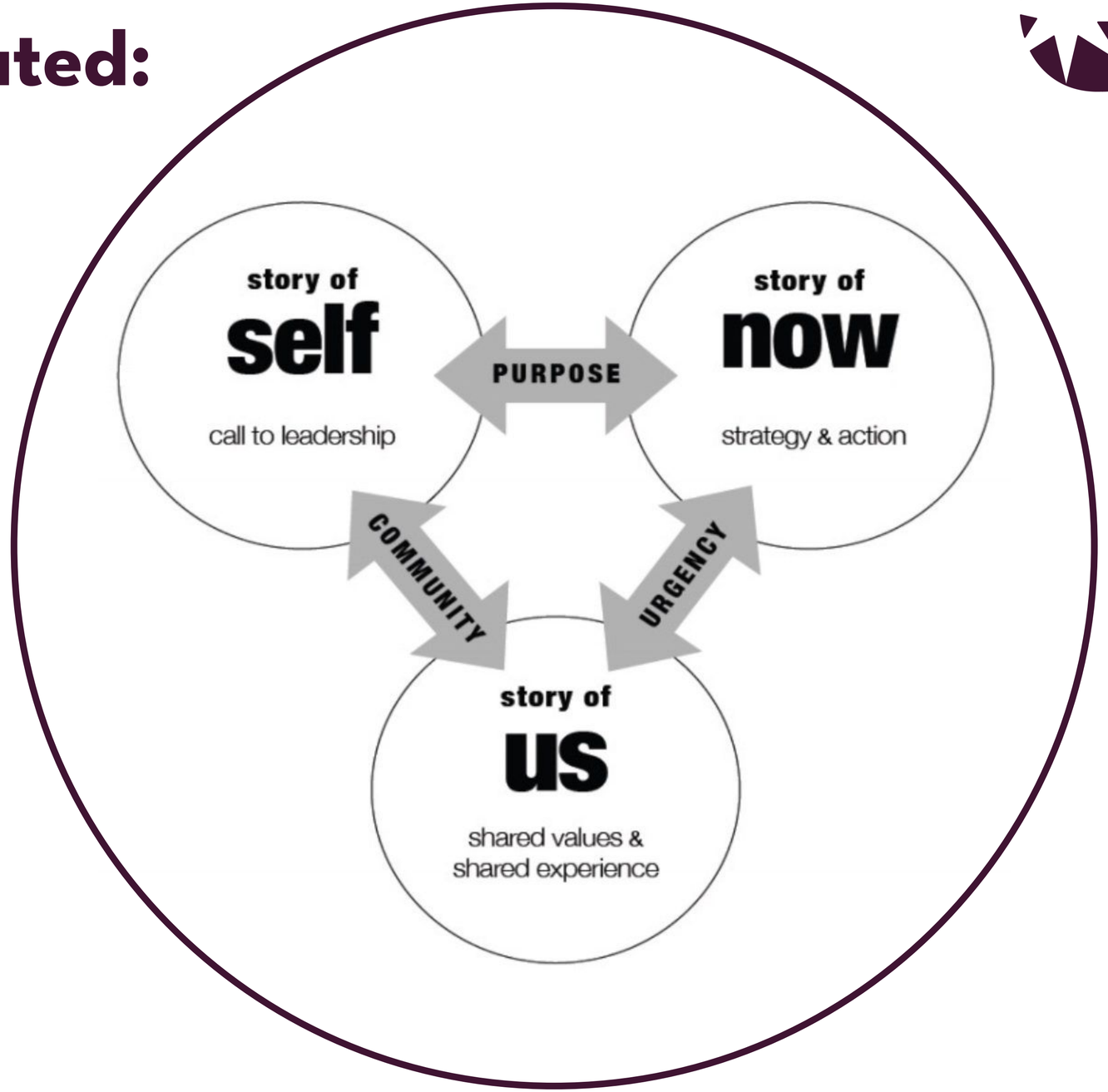
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Building Your Story:
The Principles of Public Narrative

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Public Narrative is created:

- For a specific reason
- Regarding an issue
- Rooted in time and place



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Public Narrative: James Croft



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Story of Self: Writing Exercise

3-MINUTE FREE WRITE:

This one's just about you! Jot down your thoughts about the following:

- Can you think of some times your work and creative life has flourished in your community?
- What are some times that you have struggled in your practice? What obstacles have you faced? (Think about specific events in your life.)
- Can you remember the moment or time that you felt called to leadership in your field? What prompted it?

Purpose: This exercise will not make it into your final narrative - this is meant to jog your memory and help you recall specific events and stories that you can use in your story.

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Story of Us: Writing Exercise

Keeping your community and their main issues in mind:

- Can you make note of a story when you faced a shared challenge together in your work?
- How about a challenge that affected you and others differently?
- What were the stakes? What did you stand to gain/lose?

Note how this story could connect to your Story of Self. Tip: Make it place-based and specific!

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Story of Now: Writing Exercise

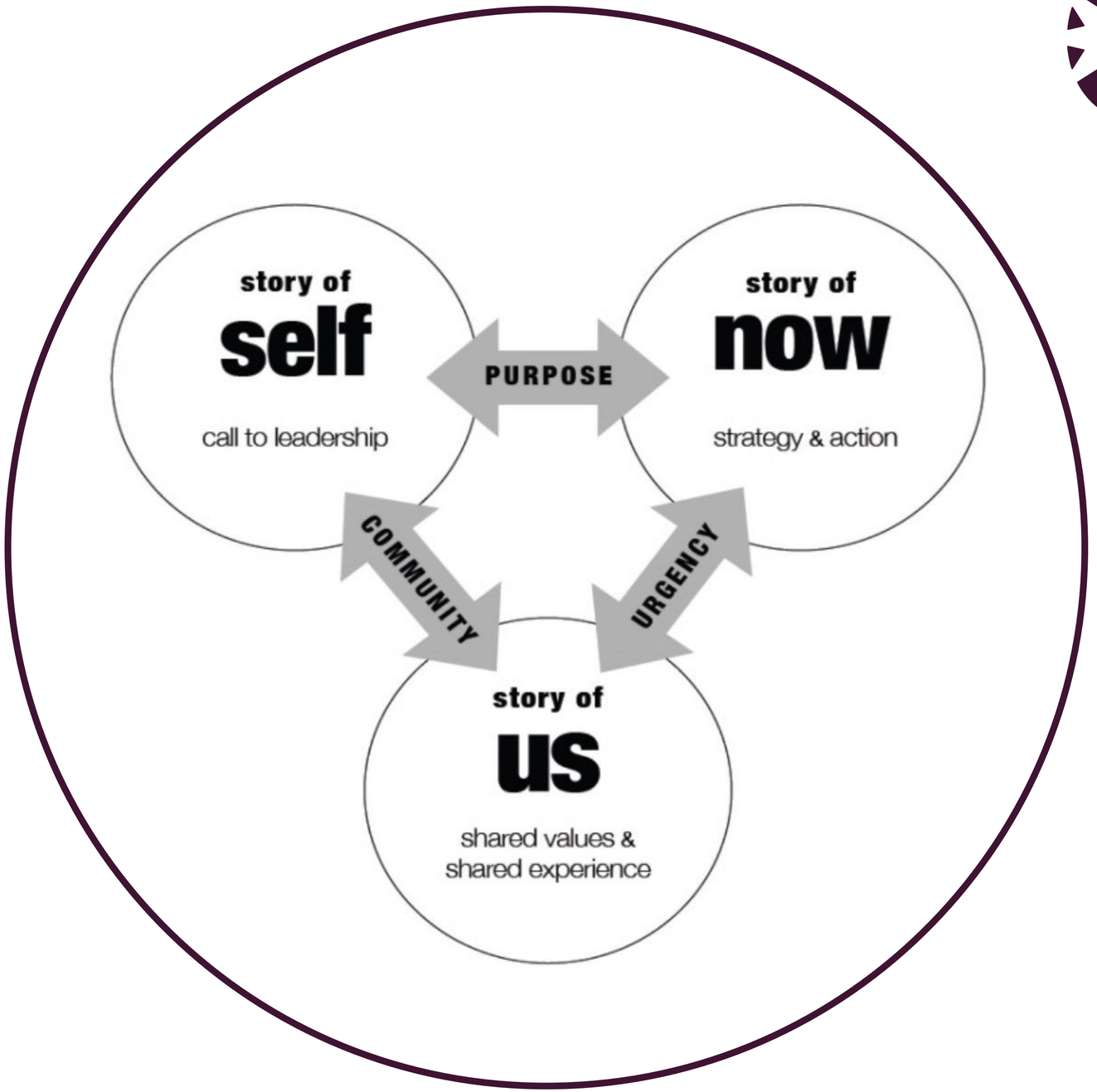
Based on the stories you've chosen, identify a central issue for this exercise.
Answer the following questions to underscore the urgency of the issues

- What is the challenge that we must act on now?
- What will happen if we don't act?
- How would we use a win on any of these asks to make real change on this issue?

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Connecting the dots:

- Purpose
- Community
- Urgency



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Advocacy Brass Tacks

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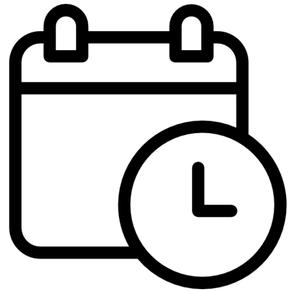
Advocacy Messaging & Conversation Tips



PREPARE

Who, What, Where, Why, & How?

- Know how it works and assume you do not know already.
- Find the facts that support your perspective.
- Know the facts that that support other perspectives and prepare for them.
- Know the official. What are their interests and priorities?
- Ask questions & research your audience!



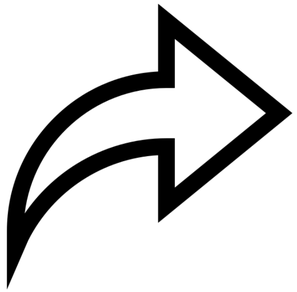
GET THE MEETING/ACCESS

Patient, persistent, polite & grateful

- It may take a while, be patient & persistent.
- Never lose your cool, always be polite, and lead with gratitude.
- Make it easy for them: time, date, location, platform, etc. that serves their needs.

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Advocacy Messaging & Conversation Tips



SHARE

Narrative as example of desired outcome.

- Center the story.
- Humans relate to stories and emotions about other humans— be a human.



EDUCATE

Information/data to put ask in context.

- Adding logic to emotion makes a stronger case and provides context.
- Limit the use of jargon. Keep facts and figures focused.
- Meet officials where they are — What do they care about and how does the arts intersect?

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Advocacy Messaging & Conversation Tips



ASK

Make the request for an action/outcome.

- Try for a “yes,” settle for a “maybe.”
- Have a backup ask ready.
- Accountability is key. Ask for a follow up conversation or decision timeline.



LISTEN

Understand and acknowledge their response.

- If you disagree: respectfully acknowledge, address, & respond.

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Advocacy Messaging & Conversation Tips



ADAPT

Process, consider, adjust, & compromise.

- Compromise may not be possible.
- Flexibility is not a weakness- it is an asset.
- Its OK to say “I don’t know.” Ask to follow up later with details.



GRATITUDE

Before, at the start/end, after, and

- Thank you notes, letters, and/or emails.
- Immediate follow up to staffers: Recap of discussion, legislative items, materials/handouts, your contact info.

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Advocacy Methodology

- **Messaging**:
  - One-way communication to decision makers.
  - Often the first step: email, letter, or voicemail.

- **Conversation:**
  - Two-way communication between advocate and decision maker.
  - Advocate and decision-maker in dialogue about an issue.

- **Relationship:**
  - Multiple conversations & communication.
  - Gratitude, friendliness, familiarity, and mutual respect.
  - Treat them like a friend and they will start to become one.

- **Influence:**
  - Communication through those with influence.
  - Find the best messenger, perhaps with an existing relationship.
  - Messaging, conversation, and/or relationship(s) with influencer(s).

- **Public Awareness:**
  - Messaging to the public in order to influence decision makers.
  - Email lists, news media, social media, events, and activism.
  - Caution: This can make both friends and enemies quickly.

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Plan Your Strategy

Effective Advocacy is Collective Advocacy.

- Who else is (or could be) on your core team?

One-on-ones

- Nurturing relationships and building your base
- Learn about issues among your base.
- Open channels of communication and trust.
- Recruit a core team and then build a larger engaged base.

Power Mapping:

- Who makes decisions and/or has influence?
- Build relationships with representatives and officials.
  - Do not just talk about your issues.
  - Be friendly. They will be more likely to see your point of view.

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Year Round Engagement

- **Invite elected officials** to your cultural events (even if they never come).
- **Contact elected officials and their staff** regularly about your issues.
- **Use advocacy training** to meet with city councils, mayors, school boards, park districts, and other arts stakeholders on key issues and opportunities.
- **Encourage other arts leaders** to be civically engaged (get out the vote, arts orgs as polling places, ballot parties, etc.)

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Arts Intersections:
How the arts support the public.

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Arts Intersections

ARTS & HEALTH

- A World Health Organization review of over 3,000 studies, led by researchers at University College London's Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care, found the arts play a major role in preventing ill health, promoting health, and managing and treating illness across the lifespan.

- Arts-on-prescription programs are a low-cost complement to clinical care, with research showing they are cost-effective, reducing doctor visits while participants gain transferable skills.

The Arts & Health Project



Example: Arts & Health Community Conversation

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Arts Intersections

ARTS & NATURAL RESOURCES

- Use arts programming and interpretive installations to enrich the visitor experience and communicate an area's historical, natural, and cultural heritage.

- Visualize species and habitats to build public participation in conservation and stewardship.

Nisqually Refuge Mural Project



Example: *Friends of Nisqually NWRC commissioned a local artist, Carrie Ziegler, to paint a large mural portraying the Nisqually Watershed, from glacier to sound in Washington State.*

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Arts Intersections

ARTS & TRANSPORTATION/SAFETY

- Integrate art into pedestrian and cyclist safety, traffic calming, and complete streets projects as visual cues that improve safety.

- Activate transit stops and pedestrian ways with art to make them more inviting and increase ridership.

Asphalt Art Initiative



Examples: *Asphalt Art Initiative project at Baum Grove in Pittsburgh, PA. Mural by Tim Engelhardt and Randi Stewart with Friendship Community Group.*

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Arts Intersections

ARTS & CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

- Give incarcerated individuals outlets for positive self-expression that support mental health and anger management, reduce conflict, and build life skills and career readiness.

- Extend arts-based wellness programming to correctional officers.

The Prison Arts Project



Example: *William James Association Prison Arts Project*.

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Reflection

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So what have we learned so far?

1. Current moment urges us to advocate for the arts & cultural sector.
2. There are multiple cultural policy opportunities at every level of government.
3. Key advocacy definitions & considerations: lobbying, electioneering, advocacy/education
4. Case studies of effective advocacy
5. Building your story: Story of self, now, us
6. Methodology & tips for advocating and meeting with public officials.
7. Intersections of art and other sectors that can strengthen your advocacy.

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Q & A

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So, what do you do next?

1. Return to this training!
2. Connect with organizations/people near you already advocating:
   - State or local arts advocacy organization: Creative States Coalition Website
   - Local arts service organization: National Arts Service Organization List & Data Tool
3. Check out other resources:
   - Policy Literacy for the Creative Sector
   - Arts Alliance Illinois
   - Arts North Carolina
4. Meet with your team & identify how you can become an advocate.
5. Plan & take action.
6. Tell someone what you're doing & bring them along.

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Resources Pt. 1

1. Claire Rice Bio: https://www.thechicagonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/RiceC.bio_.pdf
2. Nate McGaha Bio: https://www.uncsa.edu/design-production/alumni-stories/nate-mcgaha.aspx
3. Alejandra Duque Cifuentes Bio: https://www.consultingadc.com/alejandra-duque-cifuentes
4. Creative States Coalition: https://www.creativestatescoalition.org/about
5. Public Funding for the Arts 2025: https://reader.giarts.org/read/public-funding-for-the-arts-2025#_ftn1
6. NASAA State Legislative Roundup: https://classic.nasaa-arts.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/State-Legislative-Roundup-2025.pdf
7. Alliance for Justice/Bolder Advocacy: Practical Guidance for Nonprofits:

   https://afj.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/PRACTICAL-GUIDANCE-IL-Lobbying-05.24.22.1-2.pdf
8. Public Narrative: Marshall Ganz: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1Z2Rog--P8
9. Public Narrative: James Croft

   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_kZxRWT504&list=PLd9kVMoypdmrPvP5atqVvNXGqa0PW56dQ&index=1
10. WHO Study: https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/9789289054553
11. Path with Art: https://pathwithart.org/

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Resources Pt. 2

12. A Watershed Moment - Nisqually Refuge Mural Project: https://carriezieglер.com/journal/nisqually-refuge-mural-project
13. Arts in the Parks: https://ohiodnr.gov/home/news-and-events/all-events/parks-wc-events/arts-in-the-parks
14. Asphalt Art Initiative: https://asphaltart.bloomberg.org/?stream=science&lctg=623f6d56f2fa3d41c117c93b
15. MTA Music: https://www.mta.info/agency/arts-design/music
16. Prison Arts Project: https://williamjamesassociation.org/prison-arts-project-3/
17. The Marshall Project: https://www.themarshallproject.org/2026/10/09/quilt-prison-vermont-restorative-justice
18. This is a helpful resource to identify some ties to specific issues outside the arts, where the arts can move the needle:

    https://ww2.americansforthearts.org/explorer
19. National Arts Service Organizations List & Data Tool:

    https://datastudio.google.com/u/0/reporting/136a8c78-812c-45a8-a781-ac0567b635d9/page/p_148y3uxegd
20. Policy Literacy for the Creative Sector: https://www.consultingadc.com/policytemplate
21. Arts Alliance Illinois: https://artsalliance.org/advocacy/
22. Arts North Carolina: https://artsnc.org/advocacy/

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