Future Leadership™ Program
Survey Results October 2008

Executive Summary

The question of who will lead our cultural institutions in the future is being widely discussed in our field. The increasing complexity of these organizations will require confident, highly trained leaders who can respond to a changing environment and who can access ongoing professional development services to continually strengthen their abilities. In considering how National Arts Strategies might be of service to this cadre of future leaders, we elected to take a direct approach to determining their needs: We engaged them in a discussion with us and with established leaders in order to determine what they want and need to prepare for the leadership roles they hope to fill.

NAS defines future leaders as people who see themselves three to five years away from senior positions in nonprofit cultural institutions. Following extended on-line and in-person conversations about the needs of future leaders from January through August 2008, NAS conducted a survey with participants that captured the key themes of that discussion. This survey was the next step in working with leaders to consider programmatic design, as we wanted to discover how future leaders would like to learn, what they would like to learn, and what barriers they see that make both learning and advancement challenging. By engaging both existing leaders and the next generation of leadership in the design of the programs that will serve them, we hope to assist them in advancing within the field.

The survey produced a small but informative sample of 122 leaders, with 117 leaders answering all the questions. The details of their responses are included at the conclusion of this discussion paper. We are sharing the results of this survey as a series of blog posts on the Future Leadership Program Design blog at www.artstrategies.org, as well as in this article, to encourage further discussion about how to support the energy and promise of our future leadership Each section of the report has been published as an individual post so you can comment on the overall report or discuss the ideas in one section specifically. We will continue to engage with future leaders to design an ongoing program of events and services specifically for them, and will launch with our first event in the first quarter of 2009. The full timetable for the program and this first event will be discussed further through the Program Design blog.

Key Findings

While the small sample does not offer a comprehensive view of the needs of all future leaders nationally, it does yield some valuable information about where future leaders would like to go and what gaps in knowledge and experience they feel they need to fill to achieve these aspirations.

Several overarching themes emerged from this research. Respondents want to add to their skills and knowledge not only to broaden their competence and prepare them for leadership, but also to deepen their ability to perform well in the jobs they currently hold. They seek far greater responsibility in their current posts, and would like more guidance and structure to determine what they need to learn in future and which experiences they will need for leadership posts.

Connection to community emerged as being both personally motivating and important for the future of institutions. Most younger leaders expect that they will need to move to jobs in new organizations to gain training, experience, advancement, and greater financial rewards. Many believe they will need to move to new cities in order to find these growth opportunities, and this is an obstacle to their personal and professional growth. Ongoing educational programs that provide structure and a mix of theory and practice were seen as desirable. Balancing life and work emerged as a factor in determining how educational programs might be delivered, and many saw the need for a professional development plan that is flexible but intellectually challenging.

The biggest barriers to pursuing consistent professional development plans were time and money, with the demands of work being a pressure on time that many found hard to overcome. Despite this, the preferred method for learning was the highest quality of face to face interaction and teaching, supported by distance learning. Further, respondents felt that face to face interaction over a sustained period of time would be the most effective way to build or strengthen peer networks – a highly valued result. Many people recognized the need for career-long learning, and see gaps in their current skill-set around the "hard skills" of marketing, fundraising, technology, and board management, and also in the "soft skills" of team leadership. Finally, mentorships were cited repeatedly as being invaluable and extremely desirable, in large part because they were seen to provide timely and candid feedback and help with setting career goals and priorities.

A detailed summary of our findings is shared in this article and on the Program Design blog, including participant responses to individual questions. Our objective in sharing the survey results is to encourage further discussion and full participation in the design of the first NAS service specifically for our next wave of arts and culture executives. We hope you will add your thoughts and challenges on the Future Leadership blog or the community discussion at www.artstrategies.org.

Aspirations

The first part of our survey asked people about their aspirations and goals, and included questions about where they would like to be in five years, what type of professional development planning they undertook, and what detailed elements of professional development were most important to them.

> "I would like to remain in the museum field. But I would like to be at a larger institution that is financially more stable and that has the staffing and collection to be more ambitious programmatically. My goals would be to make the museum's collection more relevant to the communities and audiences we serve – to make art a greater part of our everyday lives."

> "I think I would like to be the executive director of one of the smaller contemporary visual or performing arts organizations . . . having been a lieutenant for so long, I feel that I am ready to step up and take control of my own organization, but I would prefer to work with a smaller arts organization because I think that is the place where you can really take risks, get your hands dirty and make a difference."

Respondents are interested in having greater responsibility within their current organizations, and the chance to expand their skills within their current jobs. Gaining a greater breadth of experience, performing well in their current posts, finding the best "next step" in a career, and balancing life and work more effectively were all important to those who see themselves as future leaders.

> "I want to be right where I am now – the Director of Development. I expect my job to be bigger and my staff to be larger."

> "I've gotten much further in my career more quickly than I had planned. In a year, the campaign that I am working on will be complete, and I'll have to make a choice about what's next. . . I've been attending more professional development events lately. Those have given me insight about what I am naturally best at and what opportunities are out there. But I'm also trying to factor in the fact that I would like to have children within the same 3 – 5 year time frame."

> "My goals are to become more recognized for what I have accomplished regionally to better position myself nationally."

A significant number of people shared their personal values, and made it clear that they want to work for institutions that share these values. One respondent noted the desire to "be other focused, not self-focused, to have a cause that helps make a difference in the lives of others." Many of these comments reflected a value of community building, and the desire to see their organizations contribute to this.

> "I want to be working for an institution that is helping better the lives of people within the community, that encourages creativity and unselfish ambition, that cares about the lives of the employees and the public it serves."

> "The organization must be more robust than it is today, paying a living wage to musicians and staff and recognized by the community as an invaluable asset."

> "I would like to advance an activist role for cultural institutions with regard to community life, national questions and relationships among cultures."

Professional Development

To make their goals a reality, respondents noted that ongoing professional development matters to them. They want to be successful in the jobs they are doing, but also training up for the next opportunity. They want to make sure they "don't take steps in the wrong direction, or steps that aren't moving forward." They would welcome a structured program of professional development, flexible enough to accommodate very busy schedules and heavy workloads, and composed of a mix of services including formal educational opportunities, mentoring, peer networks and the chance to learn more on the job by taking on projects and special programs.

> "I have found that many managers in nonprofits manage by instinct rather than training, and scoff at the idea of leadership training. I do not want to be that type of manager and leader and would heartily welcome new tools to empower me, and to lead my staff effectively."

Respondents to the survey clearly want a mix of structured and on-the-job learning experiences. We were surprised at how many people stressed the value of face to face learning. This seems to be linked to both the richer learning experience that is created, and the chance to create new networks. People are looking to learn from a broader range of experiences at work, and want to include experiential learning in any structured education program.

"I would like to see a leadership program for directors who desire to become executive directors one day. The program would assist with goals, strategies and help create a plan to take my job to the next level. As a current development director, I am always hearing about the economy and how it affects what we do...I would want an in-depth discussion about what is working for arts organizations during this time in our history. Finally I would like a program dedicated to mentorships, and using other professionals for guidance, resources and assistance."

"I need a few more kinds of experiences to give a breadth of training I can rely on in new situations."

"I want to spend time shadowing leaders in similar positions to uncover what the every-day looks like."

"I am working with my supervisor to develop my communication and leadership skills, and build my network. I plan on taking continuing education classes at the master's level offered by my employer."

"I am currently enrolled in an arts and cultural management graduate program. My thesis will focus on fundraising, specifically looking at methods that cultural organizations can use to cultivate individual support from the communities of color that they serve. Another key element of my plan is to continue networking to expose me to new colleagues and partners."

"I need more business training and more experience working with board members and people involved in the business world. I do want to take more professional development courses."

Mentoring was mentioned so often and in such detail that it is clear that this is important to most of our respondents. People are looking for guidance, for candor, and for someone with experience to help them shape a career and a professional development program. In many cases, mentoring is happening as part of a management relationship, but this has drawbacks, in that it can make it more difficult to be candid with a mentor, or to hear suggestions objectively. Whatever form it takes, mentoring is seen as an essential part of personal and professional development, and a key element in constructing a framework for learning and new experiences.

"I need career coaching. I need assistance evaluating my skills and finding the right job match for my interests."

"I meet with a group of business men outside my field of employment on a weekly basis for feedback – and encouragement."

"I have a paid executive coach. We talk about work and personal life as a whole. We discuss problems – it's the first time I have ever had a coach and it's been very enlightening."

"My mentors include my boss, who supports me in many ways. Her trust in me is evident and she allows me to be part of her decision making process. Also, she demands highly of me and is very straightforward when she wants to see a change."

"They allow me to learn from them through observation and assistance. My mentors have exposed me to countless opportunities, experiences, and people."

"There is no substitute for having a one on one relationship with someone knowledgeable who takes an interest in your learning."

What Future Leaders Want to Learn

The next wave of top executives in our field are looking to build analytical "hard skills" as well as interpersonal "soft skills." Finance, fundraising, marketing, and technology were all named often as topics that people want to know more about. Working more effectively in groups, overall strategy, and working with boards were also mentioned more than a few times. For the established leader who believes that age is the determining factor in how much you feel you have to learn about technology, this quote is intriguing:

"One of my concerns as a future leader is that while I am part of the younger, technology savvy generation, technology is progressing every moment and I am already out of touch with what the even younger generation knows how to do. I think tech training should be an essential part of any professional development program."

Finance and managing financial risk came up repeatedly as areas where aspiring leaders feel they need more training and a greater understanding. Given the challenges that nonprofit arts organizations face with regard to financial resource, it is not surprising to hear that.

"While I manage a significant departmental budget and understand basic finance, I do not have day to day exposure to the type of financial management that is necessary when one is responsible for a multi-million dollar enterprise. I could definitely use some additional training in managing cash flow as well as basic money management strategies."

We also heard from people about the "soft skills" they would like to learn: managing teams, decision making, networking.

"I need to be a stronger manager, knowing when to step in and when to let a staffer fail. I think the ideal program would teach not only specific skills but also intangibles like how to network effectively, communicate well, how to be yourself while being professional."

"A program that assists leaders with ways to motivate and inspire a new generation of employees and volunteers. How to train them in an effective way? How to retain them?"

The Best Method for Learning

Our survey asked people about the style and delivery of professional development programs that they had found particularly helpful in the past, and encouraged them to think about how they want to learn going forward.

Characteristics of strong programs included outstanding teaching, the chance for peer networking, the user of case studies or case stories, a mixture of rigorous theory and applied learning, and time away from work and the office that allowed time for reflection. In-person learning seemed to be desirable for people, while about a third of our respondents did not have enough experience with distance learning to say if they would find it useful. The convenience, cost and ease of distance learning was attractive, but the quality of prior experiences had varied in using technologies such as discussion boards and webinars. There was a general sense that if the content was strong and the

technology easy to use and reliable, these types of educational offering could have value, most particularly as part of mixed program of group and individual learning.

> "The best leadership development I've had was in graduate school for arts management, which was heavily case and article based. This was extremely helpful in building vocabulary and shared theories, and real life case studies truly done by me and my classmates) truly opened our eyes to the difficulty of applying theory to practice."

> "The best aspects of the best programs I have experienced boil down to three things: the quality of the teacher or presenter, the information, and the activities that reinforce the information. This would include recommended reading."

> "A program that takes place in person certainly has more appeal than something that happens virtually for me. I love the idea of hearing from leaders about what they think it takes to be a great leader."

> "Personally, I love the very real contact that comes from people getting together in actual meetings."

> "I have never been on a webinar that held my attention."

> "A webinar with private and public chat capabilities was extremely helpful to ask pointed questions without having to share with the entire group."

> "I like the webinar conferences that encourage many people from one organization to participate together. Not each from their own computer, but in a conference room, experiencing the webinar together."

> "Webinars are great – I especially love it when a group can meet online and view a presentation while talking live on the phone so Q&A happens fast."

There was a strong call for learning that could be applied. Action learning and practical exercises coupled with strong theoretical content were very appealing to respondents. This suggests that layered techniques of learning would be of value.

> "Practical, practical, practical. While theory and discussion are important, there have to be practical take-aways."

> "A program that recognizes and explores the "new work environment" of the 21st. century including telecommuting, contracting, and consulting."

> "These three elements would be important to me in a leadership development program: 1) decision making skills – how can I better analyze a situation and come to a logical, risk-balanced choice? 2) ethics – how do I avoid or work through grey areas with integrity and 3) relationships – will I meet and develop a mutually supportive relationship based on shared experiences and trust, with other individuals who have similar goals and career challenges?"

A final program feature that attracted people was an ongoing program of learning, especially if it involves working with a consistent cohort. Extending learning opportunities over time seemed to help people both use and retain information.

"Especially the continuity of learning, information and support – more than just one shot deals, although I worry about the commitment level generally given an already full workload."

"I think a longer term relationship would allow for an increase of trust."

"I think (a longer term program) is a great idea. One, because it provides a peer-learning opportunity and two, because it would help create a support network for leaders of my generation to call upon."

Barriers to Learning

There were three leading barriers to taking part in ongoing professional development and learning: competing demands on individual's time, the challenge of balancing demands at work and at home, and cost. The time and financial investment required introduce a unique challenge for these professionals. Respondents felt that it was often difficult to assess whether an opportunity would be worth their time and money before taking part in the learning. Designing a solution to these barriers is essential if people are to commit to these programs over the longer term.

"Working in a nonprofit, the money for professional development is not easily attained, finances are often the reason for putting off professional development."

"My biggest barrier is that the day to day operations of my department are so time-consuming, and there is always so much to do that I don't feel I have the time to learn or absorb as much as I need to."

"I am so caught up in current work and deadlines that time to focus on my personal goals falls by the wayside. I recently decided this is unacceptable."

"There is insufficient formal leadership training for musicians and for that matter for other parts of the organization."

Smaller organizations do not have the resource to provide a breadth of "on the job" training and experiences, and even larger institutions struggle to find the time and money to devote to training. Loyalty to the organization is often high, and this discourages high-potential staff from changing jobs to gain new experiences. The lack of freely flowing information about both employment and learning opportunities compounds the difficulties in undertaking professional development. One particularly compelling response described this barrier:

"Because 'career tracks' are rare within the non-profit world, I feel like many leaders and entry-level employees suffer from a lack of understanding about how to build a career in a non-profit. Helping NPOs develop internal career tracks as well as an understanding of external career tracks would offer structure to entry level and more focused recruiting and training by leaders. My vision would be that NPOs would send their promising new employees to learn about the structure of the field they work in and what skills they need to be developing."

The desire for a more systematic, field-wide resource for learning and growing was evident in a number of responses. Graduate degree programs were referenced as examples of how programs both can provide structure and signal status and qualifications. This type of program is missing in the arts and culture for working professionals.

Responses to Questions

We do not have permission from the survey respondents to share the raw data, however we hope the following summary will provide additional material for discussion. As you will see, the survey sample is small and the range of responses are therefore only suggestive of the complete picture for the next cohort of leaders in arts and culture. We reviewed the data in light of our experience working with and talking with cultural professionals over the last several years, and took note of data that matched our prior experiences, and also the data that did not. We hope you will add your thoughts on the Future Leadership Program Design blog at www.artstrategies.org to help fill in the picture and help identify critical areas for more comprehensive research..

1. Where do you want to be in five years?

The respondents (117) described three main aspects of their future careers – the positions they would like to hold, the characteristics of organization they'd be working for or leading, and the skills they would acquire through experience, a graduate degree, and / or professional development training.

Position Descriptions

The positions included senior level jobs in various areas such as production, development, and marketing, and executive positions such as General Manager, Managing Director and Executive Director. Independent producer and artist studio head were reported by one respondent each.

Characteristics of the Organization

The disciplines of the organizations mentioned ran the gamut, e.g., symphony, theatre, museum, artist-focused, multi-disciplinary venue, and arts center. The budgets or size descriptions varied and included small, mid-sized (listed as $5-10 million) and major. The most widely mentioned organizational characteristics are listed below.

- Stable
- Innovative
- Community centered, relevant, and committed to having a great impact on the community
- "Committed to quality and scholarship over passing fads"
- Strong financial foundation
- Appropriately resourced (people and dollars)
- Has a good working environment (e.g., paying a living wage, challenging and engaging staff)
- Flexible but hard working
- "High energy environment that values creativity, flexibility, humor, enterprise, growth and adaptation"
- "Values staff at every level, minimizing turnover and facilitating mentorship of future leaders"

Skills

The skills these professionals feel are most important to their future success include both "hard" analytical skills such as finance and marketing, and "soft" interpersonal skills required to lead and manage people.

- Effective and inspiring leadership
- Team building
- Managing effectively, including multiple generations
- Working well with large teams
- Creative thinking and problem solving
- Managing difficult conversations
- Negotiation

- Managing strategy and day to day operations
- Organizing others to work efficiently
- Financial modeling and management
- Assessing and taking risks
- Program development and evaluation
- Project management

2. Do you have a professional development plan?

Of the 101 who answered this question, 48 said yes and 53 said no.

3. If yes, what are the key elements of your plan?

Forty nine (49) responses fell into seven primary categories:

- Networking, including building a professional network of peers or higher-level individuals (18 responses)
- Exploiting the current job, i.e., learning from colleagues, taking on more responsibilities: (15 responses)
- Pursue a continuing education program or a Masters level degree (13 responses)
- Attending workshops / conferences / seminars (11 responses)
- Volunteering in order to build a skill or increase experience, including being on a board and volunteering with a local community group (5 responses)
- Reading / individual study (5 responses)
- Changing jobs (5 responses)

4. If no, what skills and experience will you need to realize your vision and your goals?

Fifty three (53) responses fell into six primary categories:

- Hard skills e.g. finance, marketing, fundraising (15 responses)
- Soft skills e.g. motivation, conflict management, negotiation (16 responses)
- Additional experience / applied learning (12 responses)
- Building a professional network in order to learn more from current leaders (7 responses)
- Further education, as in a graduate degree (5 responses)
- Setting up or strengthening a peer network (5 responses)
- Career assessment and coaching (5 responses)

5. What barriers will you need to overcome to reach your goal?

One hundred (100) responses fell into seven primary categories:

- Time / conflicting demands on time (34 responses)
- Cost (16 responses)
- Specific skills / experience (15 responses)
- Supporters to help navigate career path (5 responses)
- Being "pigeon-holed" in a particular area such as development (6 responses)
- Confidence / inertia (6 responses)
- Lack of support from current organization (5 responses)

Other responses were infrequent but suggest issues that may be interesting to explore further, including the need for a graduate degree, lack of visibility to those who would search for and hire a leader, lack of an appropriate network, and age.

6. Do you have any mentors?

Of the 101 responses to this question, 64 said yes and 37 said no.

7. If yes, how do they support you?

Of the 64 who answered this question, the common theme was that mentors listened, provided advice, guidance, feedback and, in some cases, contacts or connections. Some mentors were identified as supervisors and some were identified as previous bosses or other professional contacts.

8. Recalling the best program you've experienced, what was the most useful aspect of the programming/training?

Eighty five (85) responses fell into nine primary categories:

- Peer networking / being part of a cohesive group (26 responses)
- Case stories about successes and failures, either in person or in writing (18 responses)
- Top quality instructors (14 responses)
- Challenging, rigorous subject matter (12 responses)
- Learning that can be applied (11responses)
- Time for reflection and increasing self awareness (6 responses)
- Energizing / focusing / inspiring (5 responses)
- Setting aside time to learn / being away from work (4 responses)
- Face to face interaction (3 responses))

9. What was the least useful aspect of the programming / training?

Seventy one (58) responses fell into seven categories.

- Content that is off point or not tailored to the audience (19 responses)
- Teaching approaches that are not participatory (10 responses)
- Presenters / leaders who are not good teachers (10 responses)
- All aspects of the program were satisfactory / useful (7)
- Content was not practical / applicable (4 responses)

- "Games" and ice breaker exercises (5 responses)
- Individual participants who dominate the session (2 responses)

10. If you have any experiences with professional development in new media, e.g., webinars, podcasts, discussion boards, which of these approaches have been most helpful?

Eighty (80) respondents fell into four primary categories. The use of new media to support professional development is new in our sector, as indicated by the number of respondents who reported no experience with these technologies. The difference in types of new media reported as most helpful may reflect differences in their effectiveness and the preferences of cultural professionals. However, it is also possible that the differences simply reflect different levels of exposure to these new technologies in our sector.

- No experience with new media or too little experience to have an opinion (39 responses)
- Webinars (25 responses)
- Discussion boards (11 responses)
- Podcasts (5 responses)

11. Which approaches have been least useful?

Sixty seven (67) responses fell into the following primary categories. Again, the majority of respondents said that they did not have experience using new media for professional development. And again, the different levels of satisfaction may reflect real differences in preferences or simply differences in the level of exposure to the technologies. It is interesting to note that the relative position of webinars and discussion boards is different for the question "most helpful" and the question "least useful," suggesting more may be here than simply a difference in exposure.

- No experience with new media or too little experience to have an opinion (44 responses)
- Discussion boards (11 responses)
- Webinars (7 responses)
- Podcasts (3 responses)

Other comments noted difficulties getting the technologies to work consistently, the assumption by the presenters that everyone has the same technical expertise, the inability to network through these approaches, and the experience that the content is often not appropriate to the mode selected for teaching e.g. email, PowerPoint, and lecture formats.

12. Why do you choose on-line sessions?

Thirty three (33) respondents who used on-line professional development reported the following:

- Convenience (22 responses)
- Cost (6 responses)
- Content - topic and presenter (4 responses)
- Stay connected to people from other geographic locations (2 responses)

13. If you haven't chosen to use an on-line session, why not?

Forty (40) responses fell into these primary categories:

- Prefer face-to-face interaction (15 responses)
- Content not interesting or appropriate (6 responses)
- Time (5 responses)
- Cost (4 responses)
- Difficult to focus on sessions while at work (4 responses)
- Convenience / access to the necessary technology (4 responses)

14. If you are (or were) involved in an on-going leadership development program, what do you like best about the approach?

Forty two (42) respondents who are or have been involved in a longer-term professional development program reported the following:

- Depth and variety of content able to explore (14 responses)
- Peer networking (13 responses)
- Face-to- face interaction (8 responses)
- Longer time to learn and apply (6 responses)
- A caring mentor / coach / facilitator (5 responses)
- Cost (2 responses)

15. If you are (or were) involved in an on-going leadership development program, what do you like least about the approach?

Forty four (44) respondents who are or have been involved in a longer-term professional development program reported the following:

- Not enough face to face interaction (12 responses)
- Too large a time commitment (6 responses)
- Lack of structure / inconsistent process (5 responses)
- On line approaches (3 responses)
- Content not relevant (3 responses)
- Too little peer interaction and networking (2 responses)
- No ongoing support for alumni (2 responses)

16. Even if you haven't been involved in a longer term type of program, is this approach appealing?

Of the 75 respondents, 6 said no and 69 said yes.

17. You have the opportunity in the Future Leadership program to be a partner in the creation of events and services specifically for you. Tell us about anything else you want in your professional development services e.g. what are the three things that would make a program perfect for you today? What does your vision for the perfect leadership development experience look like?

Eighty seven (87) responses suggested the following core program elements:

- Teaching on analytical skills e.g. finance and marketing (41 responses)
- Teaching on interpersonal skills e.g. motivation and communication (37 responses)

- Mentor support (28 responses)
- Peer networking and peer-to-peer learning (26 responses)
- Investment in top quality teachers and presenters (18 responses)
- Repeated exposure to concepts through applied projects (15 responses)
- Professional development planning (15 responses)
- Help envisioning the options for the future e.g. career paths, the real experiences of top executives (9 responses)