

Rhode Island State Council on the Arts
Focus Groups Report
Dreeszen & Associates Report of Findings from Focused Discussions with
RISCA Constituents and Allies

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Objectives

The Rhode Island State Council on the Arts convened representative constituents to gather information to inform RISCA strategic planning. Specifically, we sought to hear constituent opinions on two questions: 1) the state of the arts in Rhode Island, opportunities and challenges, and needs of constituents; and 2) advice to RISCA on policies, programs, goals, and strategic priorities. Assessment data from focus groups complement interviews, statewide survey, interviews, and Providence forums. Focus groups assured that statewide constituents participate in RISCA planning.

Summary Findings

Major Concerns

RISCA constituents and partners described Rhode Island's significant cultural strengths and five major challenges and opportunities.

Rich cultural assets Participants described a rich array of Rhode Island cultural assets that provide a strong and authentic basis for enhanced cultural and economic development.

Economic crisis is worrisome The current economic crisis and looming recession were top of mind for many focus group participants.

Funding crisis There is a "perfect storm" of converging funding crises.

Leadership and advocacy opportunity Discussion participants want leadership and advocacy to represent the cultural sector to the public, government, foundations, and corporations.

Creative economy opportunity The creative sector is significant, has been growing faster than other sectors, has revitalized communities and old mills, and has potential for even greater economic impact. Now is the time to capitalize on this.

Arts education decimated One focus group participant summed up a continuing critical problem, "Arts education in Rhode Island schools has been decimated."

Other Concerns

Programming shifts Some cultural organizations have modified programming in response to a changed funding and consumer environment.

Marketing and audience engagement wanted Focus group participants are looking for increased impact and economies of scale with enhanced and collaborative marketing. They see much potential for cultural tourism.

Changing media and communications Many want help adapting to news media changes as electronic media outpace print newspapers.

Audience trends vary Some focus group participants note a continued graying of audiences, a preference for familiar and accessible programming, and declining attendance. In contrast, there is a thriving music scene and enthusiasm for special events.

Glass ceiling for smaller organizations Representatives of small arts organizations described how difficult it was to break through limitations of funding, partnerships, and visibility to gain capacity.

Nonprofit capacity needed Participants cite need for help in fundraising, marketing, planning, board development, and information systems.

Convening is valuable Many cultural leaders and artists were eager for more frequent opportunities to meet, network, and exchange information with their peers.

Artists' success and challenges The participating artists are generally optimistic, but are concerned about affordable health insurance, housing, studios, business development, marketing, and networking.

Artists want business assistance While artists in our discussions have considerable business savvy, they note that many Rhode Island artists do not.

Artists want respect Artists want respect as professionals.

Regional differences even in a small state Needs and perceptions differ from north to south and in Providence and elsewhere in Rhode Island.

Influence public policies Participants appreciate RISCA's leadership to help enact critical public policies and suggest new priorities for advocacy.

Opportunities in diversity Nearly every discussion cited Rhode Island's remarkable diversity. This is a great opportunity to celebrate and educate citizens about each other through shared cultural experiences. Arts leaders are challenged to diversify.

Information wanted In spite of the explosion of online information, some focus group participants described the challenge of finding critical information.

Film industry potential Film makers noted dramatic growth in the Rhode Island film industry, spawned by tax credits and recruitment of film producers to the state. This has lately slowed.

Facility development Rhode Island has many properties with good potential for re-development for artist studios, affordable housing, creative businesses, and cultural facilities. Most developments are now stalled.

RISCA staff responsive In every group, participants praised RISCA staff for their professionalism and responsiveness.

Summary Advice to RISCA

RISCA's constituents and partners recommended what the state arts agency might do in response to the identified opportunities and concerns.

1. Lead, advocate, and represent the cultural/creative sector.
2. Leverage other agencies and funders.
3. Define or redefine RISCA's role.
4. Re-focus grants making.
5. Convene and help constituents network and collaborate.
6. Enhance RISCA visibility.
7. Enable information sharing.
8. Continue to help shape public policy.
9. Help the creative sector learn nonprofit management and arts business skills.