

OAC Strategic Planning 2013

Summary of External Consultation Phase

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Ontario Arts Council

151 Bloor Street West, 5th Floor

Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1T6

416-961-1660

Toll-free in Ontario: 1-800-387-0058

info@arts.on.ca/www.arts.on.ca

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INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Arts Council (OAC) undertook an environmental scan and consultation with external stakeholders in spring and summer 2013 as key elements of its process to develop a new strategic plan. The consultations included an online survey and a one-day focus group session with external stakeholders to explore survey findings. This document provides a brief summary of the environmental scan, and the findings of the survey and external stakeholder session.

A. The Environmental Scan

The environmental scan provides a portrait of the external issues and trends affecting the Ontario arts sector, today, and in the future. As the initial step in OAC's strategic planning process, it provided a context for the subsequent steps of the process. The scan identified three major drivers that are affecting the arts in Ontario – demographic change, economic uncertainty, and technology. These issues, along with more sector-specific trends, are impacting how the arts are created, produced, disseminated and promoted, as well as how people participate in and engage with the arts.

B. The Strategic Planning Survey

The main component of the external consultation was a comprehensive online survey launched in June 2013. The survey was designed to provide a large number of stakeholders with the opportunity to provide input on a variety of topics that had been identified in OAC staff and board sessions as relevant to OAC's strategic planning. A link to the online survey was provided through an email sent to over 28,000 individuals in English and French who receive the OAC newsletter, including representatives from organizations receiving operating grants from OAC. The e-mail also included a request to pass the link along to people in their networks who may not yet have had any contact with OAC. Additionally, the link was tweeted by OAC and others and posted on OAC's website. A video version of the e-mail was available in American Sign Language. All survey announcements indicated that the it was available on request in alternative formats such as large print, MS Word, or via oral submission. A total of 1,858 individuals responded to the survey (1,757 to the English version and 101 to the French version), resulting in 1,460 completed questionnaires.

As noted, the online external consultation survey covered a variety of topics including: the key needs/issues facing the arts sector; key issues that OAC should address; OAC's roles; the appropriate focus of OAC's activities; exploration of public value; and OAC's goals over the next five years.

KEY NEEDS/ISSUES FACING ONTARIO ARTISTS AND ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

Respondents were asked to identify the top three needs or issues facing Ontario's artists and arts organizations. This was an open-ended question for which respondents could write in answers in their own words. The most frequently mentioned needs/issues fell into the following categories, in general order of number of responses:

- Funding needs and challenges
- Low incomes in the sector
- Space to create and present art
- Art is not valued by the public
- Marketing and promotion/ Audience development
- Professional development

Respondents were then asked to select the top 10 issues or needs facing artists and arts organizations in Ontario from a fixed list of 23 issues. They were also asked to identify the top 10 issues or needs that OAC should address in its role as a provincial arts agency. The top 10 issues in each category are summarized in the following table:

The top 10 issues or needs facing artists and organizations	The top 10 issues that OAC should address
1. Lack of funding (75.9%)	1. Lack of funding (74.1%)
2. Difficulty earning a living from artistic work (74.0%)	2. Public perception of the value of the arts (66.0%)
3. Public perception of the value of the arts (69.3%)	3. Provincial, national, and international exposure (55.6%)
4. Diminishing arts education in schools (59.7%)	4. Diminishing arts education in schools (54.4%)
5. Adequate and affordable space (i.e. facilities/infrastructure) (55.7%)	5. Difficulty earning a living from artistic work (51.9%)
6. Skills and resources to market artistic work (50.4%)	6. Opportunities for artists and arts organizations to present their work (51.7%)
7. Provincial, national, and international exposure (50.1%)	7. Skills and resources to market artistic work (49.6%)
8. Increasing competition for public's time, attention and dollars (48.8%)	8. Adequate and affordable space (i.e. facilities/infrastructure) (44.4%)
9. Opportunities for artists and arts organizations to present their work (48.6%)	9. Ongoing professional/skills development (44.2%)
10. Aging audiences/Reaching younger audiences (36.3%)	10. New ways of creating and new organizational models (35.2%)

THE ROLE OF THE OAC

Respondents were asked to identify the role of a government arts agency like OAC in Ontario today. This was an open-ended question, for which respondents could write in answers in their own words.

The most common roles identified by respondents fell into two broad areas: funder/supporter of the arts; and arts advocate. These areas can be further broken down into the following specific roles most frequently identified by respondents (in general order of frequency of responses):

- Advocate about the importance of the arts to society
- Provide leadership, and vision to ensure the long-term sustainability of the arts sector
- Fund/support 'high quality' works of merit
- Fund/support emerging artists and new works
- Fund/support a diversity of art forms, cultures, organizations and communities
- Address barriers faced by some artists, organizations and communities

Although mentioned less frequently than roles relating to funding and advocacy, marketing and promotion was also identified as a role for OAC.

Respondents were then presented with a list of nine possible roles for OAC to consider, outside of its main role in granting. For each of these possible roles, they were asked to consider whether each one was a key role, other role, or not a role, for OAC.

By far the most frequently identified key role was advocacy/making the case for the public value of the arts, which was chosen as a key role by fully 82% of respondents. The other top five key roles were:

- Provide information and advice to the arts community (57%)
- Bring arts community together to share information and build relationships (51%)
- Conduct and disseminate research on the arts sector and the impact of the arts in society (49%)
- Support/deliver organization capacity building (45%)

UNIQUELY WELL

Respondents were asked to identify one thing that OAC does uniquely well. This was an open-ended question, for which respondents could write in answers in their own words. Prominent themes in the responses included:

- Support and Communications:
 - Listening to, and understanding of, artists and arts organizations

- Providing great customer service through the process
- Support offered by staff
- Communication with the arts community
- Offering training and professional development
- Convening, bringing artists and organizations together
- Grants and the Granting Process:
 - The range of funds/programs available
 - Staff support of the process
 - The jury process
- Advocacy:
 - Increasing the public's awareness of arts in Ontario
 - Undertaking research and providing reports

AREAS OF FOCUS FOR OAC'S ACTIVITIES

Respondents were presented with a series of paired concepts, and asked to indicate the appropriate balance or weight between each set of concepts in terms of where OAC's activities should be focused in the next five years. In general, the largest group of respondents felt that the appropriate balance was halfway between the two concepts, with many indicating that they expected OAC to strike a balance between the various choices when addressing the needs and interests amongst diverse stakeholders. However, within this overall context of balance, some patterns emerged when respondents were asked to indicate where the OAC's activities should be focused in the next five years, as follows:

- Artists somewhat more than organizations
- Project grants on par with operating grants
- Emerging artists/organizations slightly more than established artists/organizations
- Many small grants somewhat more than few large grants
- Professional arts activity clearly more than professional and amateur arts activity
- Informal organizational structures slightly more than formal organizational structures
- Small organizations somewhat more than large organizations
- Artistic merit clearly more than financial need
- Grants clearly more than services
- Creation/production somewhat more than distribution

WHAT OAC IS NOT FUNDING AND SHOULD BE

Respondents were asked if there is an art form or practice that OAC is not funding and should be. About three-quarters (72%) of respondents answered "No" – there is no art form or practice that OAC is not funding and should be – and 28% of respondents said "Yes".

Respondents who answered "Yes" were asked to specify what that additional art form or practice should be funded. A quarter (25%) of respondents who filled in the "If you answered yes, please specify" text box specified that they did not know or were not sure. Many others mentioned things that OAC already funds, such as: support of rural and northern artists and collectives, individual artists, and storytelling. Seven percent of respondents (7.4%) mentioned games or video game design as an art form or practice that should be added. Other suggestions were largely one-offs.

ADDITIONAL PRIORITY GROUPS

Five priority groups were identified in OAC's past strategic plan: Aboriginal, culturally diverse (artists of colour), new generation (ages 18 to 30), francophone and regional (outside the City of Toronto). Survey respondents were presented with the following list of groups and asked to indicate whether (or not) they agreed with each one becoming a priority group in OAC's next strategic plan (in addition to the current groups): artists with disabilities/Deaf artists; lesbian/gay/bisexual/transsexual/queer (LGBTQ) artists; rural artists; senior artists (aged

65 and older); New Canadian artists (5 years or less in Canada); women artists; and artists living on low incomes. There was also an opportunity for respondents to add to an “Other” category.

The top three additional groups that respondents agreed should be considered as strategic priorities by OAC were: artists living on low incomes (with 75% of respondents agreeing either strongly or somewhat); rural artists (67%); and artists with disabilities/Deaf artists (67%). As mentioned above, there was also an opportunity for respondents to specify an “Other” group. While some additional groups were specified, many used the space to make general comments on one or more of the listed groups or to support funding decisions based on artistic merit or quality, rather than on a specific group.

PUBLIC VALUE OF OAC

Respondents were asked in what ways OAC benefits, or provides value to, the public in Ontario. This was an open-ended question that respondents could answer in their own words.

Most respondents gave answers from the perspective that there is public value simply in the presence of the arts, and that therefore OAC’s support of the arts sector has inherent public value. For example, respondents identified the following aspects of OAC’s work as ways in which OAC provides value:

- Funding for the creation and presentation of art
- Support for new work and/or non-commercial work
- Support of a diversity of art forms, artists and cultures
- Addressing barriers (largely through funding) faced by some artists, organizations and communities (e.g. emerging artists, artists of colour, small/rural/northern communities, small organizations)

Of those who linked arts support to public value and artists to the public, a number of themes appeared. They are listed below (in no particular order):

- Opportunities for public access
- Exposure to the arts
- Improved quality of life
- Entertainment value
- National and international recognition
- Economic benefits
- Tourism and tourist experiences
- Community building (arts organizations as gathering places)
- Cultural development, diversity, and identity
- Fostering creativity

GOALS FOR OAC IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Respondents were asked to think about current opportunities and challenges, and suggest up to three goals for OAC over the next five years. This was an open-ended question for which respondents could write in answers in their own words. Responses were often expressed, not so much as goals, but as “what should OAC be doing?”

The most common responses, by far, related to funding. Answers in this category were quite diverse, however the following key themes emerged: accessibility of funding to the diversity of artists; continuing support for arts organizations; funding for creation/production of art; support for regions and small, rural communities; improving granting process; issues relating to artists making a living from their art; and funding an appropriate balance among the competing needs and priorities of stakeholders.

In addition to funding, but in lower numbers, there were multiple responses suggesting the following goals/priorities (in general order of frequency):

- Advocacy on the value of the arts
- Support new work and emerging artists
- Professional development for the sector

- Space to create and present art
- Marketing/promotion/presenting opportunities
- Facilitate connections amongst artists
- Access to other resources/new financial models

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The breakdown of survey respondents was as follows:

- Over 50% of respondents were individual artists. 25% were staff of arts organizations, cultural industries or government agencies. The remaining respondents were volunteers, arts attendees or patrons, or 'other'.
- In terms of artistic disciplines, the visual arts were most prevalent (21% of respondents), the remainder in declining order were music, literature, theatre, media arts, multidisciplinary arts, dance, and community arts.
- Nearly half (44%) of respondents were from the City of Toronto; 13% from each of southwest and eastern Ontario, 9% from central, 8% from south central, 6% from northeast, 4% from northwest Ontario, and about 1% from the Ontario's far north. A few people responded from elsewhere in Canada and abroad.
- In general, the profile of the respondents largely matched the profile of the population of Ontario. 16% of respondents identified themselves in the category 'people and organizations of colour'.
- Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents were either very or quite familiar with OAC. Over three-quarters (78%) had applied to OAC at some point, and 66% of respondents had received an OAC grant.

C. External Stakeholder Session

The purpose of this session was to provide an opportunity for additional, focused external stakeholder input into the strategic planning process. As the consultation process plan developed, it was decided that this session would be used to explore several key themes that were emerging from an early analysis of the survey, in order to provide insight into these findings. In July, 49 stakeholders gathered in Toronto for a one-day focus session to share their thoughts on areas of strategic focus.

Participants had either served as OAC jurors or advisors over the past year and a half, and/or were engaged in one of OAC's Equity Plan focus groups; thus, had participated in discussions that relate to key issues and the state of the field in Ontario's arts sector. These experiences, in combination with their personal background and expertise, provided very useful input to the discussion of the day. The participants represented a diverse cross-section of stakeholders: OAC's current priority groups (Aboriginal, francophone, culturally diverse/persons of colour, new generation, and regional), as well as other factors including gender, artistic discipline/practice, disability, and language. The group was heavily represented by individual artists. Simultaneous interpretation in French and American Sign Language was available for session participants.

As noted, the areas of focus for the external stakeholder session developed from the responses to OAC's strategic planning survey. Of the themes that emerged from a preliminary analysis of the survey findings, the two most predominant were that OAC has a role to play with respect to the public's perception of the value of the arts, and that funding is absolutely top of mind. In addition to digging deeper in these two areas, OAC also wanted to unpack the results of the series of survey questions that explored the appropriate focus or balance between paired concepts. Highlights from the discussions on public perception of the value of the arts, and funding priorities are included below.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE VALUE OF THE ARTS

When asked what appropriate activities are for OAC as a government agency in addressing the public's perception of the value of the arts in Ontario, participants identified the following: arts education (including in schools); advocacy to champion the value of the arts; and partnerships with other agencies and sectors. Participants noted that OAC's work in this area should focus on increasing the accessibility of the arts, supporting/encouraging

innovative approaches, and taking a long-term view to effect change. They also identified a range of different ways to think about “the public” – for example, by age, geography, degree of exposure to the arts, etc.

FUNDING PRIORITIES

Participants were asked to share their thoughts on what the funding priorities of OAC should be. No consensus was sought, but some common themes emerged. For example, items identified that OAC should do more of, or start doing, fell into the following areas (in order of frequency of mention):

- Encouraging/supporting mentorships, partnerships and connections (among artists, between artists and arts organizations, between large and small arts organizations, between arts and other sectors/funders);
- Support/champion access and diversity, including in all granting programs, access funding for grant recipients (e.g. funding for sign language interpretation, audio describers, etc.), anti-oppression training for staff and jury members, making OAC itself more accessible;
- Advocacy on the value of the arts, including in other sectors, arts in education, general public;
- Support/fund professional development opportunities;
- Outreach to diverse stakeholders (e.g. regional, First Nations, marginalized groups);
- Reimagine/reconfigure disciplinary silos to respond to blurring of disciplines/multidisciplinary work;
- Using artists as resource (e.g. in outreach, as cultural animators);
- Funding emerging artists/new work;
- Communicating about available grant categories, making grant applications (e.g. for potential first-time applicants);
- Travel/touring grants (e.g. to encourage artists to work in other regions, in disciplines like visual arts where travel costs are high, for national/international touring opportunities);
- Adapting to new models (e.g. collectives, informal structures);
- Showcasing/promotion of funded projects/organizations.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It’s clear from the number of people who took the time to complete the comprehensive online survey, or attend the full-day focus group session, that the Ontario Arts Council has many stakeholders who care deeply about OAC and about the arts in Ontario. The respondents and participants – a diverse mix of artists, arts organizations and others, from across the province – shared their candid views about the wide range of issues, needs and roles that OAC might consider addressing or fulfilling over the next five years. These thoughtful opinions, responses and ideas have provided a wealth of information that will help to inform OAC staff and board discussions, and shape OAC’s new strategic plan.

OAC looks forward to continuing the conversation with Ontarians as we all work toward the continuing vitality of Ontario’s arts sector.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information on the environmental scan and external consultations can be found in the following full reports:

- [Ontario Arts Council: 2013 Environmental Scan](#)
- [OAC Strategic Planning 2013: Report on External Consultations](#)