Joining the WESTAF Board of Trustees
Guidance for New Members

The Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) is an organization of modest size; however, its programs, processes, and organizational culture can present a daunting front to new trustees. Persons joining the WESTAF board receive a formal orientation immediately prior to their first board meeting. There is, however, a need for ongoing orientation to the organization’s many projects and a special need for informal direction concerning how a trustee can organize his or her relationship with WESTAF to be an effective board member. Following is a guide to key access points for WESTAF trustees. Becoming involved in WESTAF through these access points will allow a trustee to properly execute his or her duties.

What is the Role of a WESTAF Board Member?
WESTAF operates with a strong CEO model of governance. The WESTAF board is not a working board but a policy board that advises and directs the staff on issues of significance. The board is also charged with the evaluation of the effectiveness of WESTAF’s projects and services. Perhaps the most important duty of a board member is to consider the future environment for the organization and provide strategic vision and guidance that help the organization succeed in its evolving environment.

Trustees exercise their governance role in the organization in the following ways:

● They actively participate in the WESTAF strategic planning process that occurs every three years. Through this process, the organization’s trustees provide WESTAF with long-term strategic direction. In addition, through the planning process, trustees make decisions about the nature of organizational processes and advise regarding mid-course corrections and/or the termination of existing programs and services.

● The evaluation of existing programs, services, and processes is a key responsibility of a WESTAF board member. Trustees do not directly operate programs and services; however, they need to know how WESTAF activities are progressing and whether they are meeting the goals set forth in the strategic plan.

● As significant policy issues arise--and often outside of the planning process--board members are charged with bringing such issues to the attention of the board. If such issues are not placed on the agenda by the chair, it is the responsibility of each trustee to suggest to the chair that a certain issue needs attention.

● The evaluation of the performance of the executive director is also a responsibility of a trustee. Because in WESTAF’s strong CEO system of
governance the executive director has so much authority, a trustee must feel certain that
the executive director is exercising that authority in a way that addresses the policy
interests and strategic goals the board has established. The executive director is
evaluated annually by the executive committee. In addition, state arts agency executive
directors annually complete a survey regarding the executive director’s performance.
The trustees complete a survey of the executive director’s performance every other year.
Annually, the WESTAF chair reports the results of the executive director’s evaluation to
the trustees and invites their comments and discussion regarding the executive director’s
performance.

Who is Watching the Money?
WESTAF trustees are responsible for approving the budget of the organization
and also for calling attention to financial issues considered problematic or
potentially problematic. WESTAF finances operate under three major controls:
1) WESTAF’s books are audited annually by an outside auditor; 2) The
WESTAF treasurer conducts a monthly review of the organization’s finances; and
3) WESTAF maintains a CPA-level senior staff member to maintain its financial
records. In addition, the organization has a culture of transparency regarding all
information, particularly its finances.

Trustees intersect with the budget in the following ways:

- The WESTAF budget preparation process provides three points for
  trustee involvement: 1) A staff presentation and board discussion of the
general budget plan for the coming year. This presentation and
discussion are standing items on the board’s May meeting agenda; 2) In
late summer, the executive committee conducts an in-person review of
the draft budget and sends it with their revisions via mail to the full board.
Upon receiving the draft budget, trustees are encouraged to contact staff
and/or members of the executive committee if they have issues with
items in it; and 3) The budget is formally discussed, revised and adopted
at the organization’s annual meeting of the trustees in October. This is
the final chance for trustees to significantly change the budget prior to its
implementation.

- The board receives financial updates in every meeting packet. At any of
  the three trustee meetings, board members are invited to ask questions
and/or suggest changes to the budget.

- At any time, a board member can request additional information about any
  and all budget items. Though the budget is implemented using a number
of controls, each board member is responsible for asking significant
questions and presenting significant concerns they may have regarding its
How Do Trustees Relate to WESTAF Personnel?
WESTAF by-laws mandate that the executive director hires and fires the staff. Thus, the staff is responsible to the executive director and not to the board. The executive director can be held accountable by the trustees for staff performance in the aggregate; however, trustees cannot work directly with the organization’s staff unless the executive director approves such direct work. In practice, the executive director is receptive to comments by trustees regarding the performance of staff, particularly performance related to projects and events with which the trustees are highly familiar.

What is a Trustee’s Role Regarding Earned-Income Projects?
WESTAF’s earned-income projects have two major purposes: 1) To provide service to the arts field in general; and 2) To generate discretionary income for the organization. Although all WESTAF earned-income projects have a nexus with the arts, few--if any--would be launched if they did not have potential to generate net discretionary income. Earned-income projects at WESTAF have been necessary because funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to support WESTAF activities has increased only marginally over the years. In addition, the states in the region have been unable to grow budgetarily and, as a result, WESTAF has elected not to increase their participation fees since 1995.

Following are the areas in which WESTAF trustees can exercise authority over earned-income projects:

- Trustees approve earned-income project budgets that include revenue and expense projections for each project.
- Trustees, through the planning process and policy decisions made at board meetings, provide a policy framework for all earned-income projects.
- Trustees are responsible for requiring timely and appropriate reports and evaluations of all earned-income projects.
- Trustees are selectively asked by staff to advise on components of earned-income projects in which they hold expertise.

Why the Focus on State Arts Agencies?
WESTAF primarily focuses its work on the improvement of the capacities of state arts agencies. The organization committed to this focus in the mid-1990s, when it completely reorganized in response to a dramatic national-level reduction in National Endowment for the Arts funding that resulted in a sharp decline in its
NEA block grant. There are two key motivations for this approach. One is that the state arts agencies in the region need the help. As a group, they are less well funded and have smaller staff sizes than do their peers across the country. A second reason is that an organization of limited size like WESTAF can only leverage so much change in the region, thus focusing the organization’s resources can maximize the impact of its efforts. WESTAF once had a large arts programmatic focus in addition to its state arts agency focus. Sustaining the programmatic focus with limited dollars in a very large geographic region was deemed impractical.

WESTAF’s focus on state arts agencies requires the following actions by trustees:

- Trustees need to constantly analyze how actions and initiatives of WESTAF contribute or to detract from its emphasis on assisting state arts agencies.

- Trustees need to represent the interests of the people of their state regarding programs in which WESTAF engages with the state arts agencies. WESTAF’s work is designed to build strong agencies that provide a public value—not preserve the agencies their historic forms.

What are These Other Acronyms About?
There are four key organizations WESTAF trustees need to know about and work to develop a single position about. These organizations are:

- The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is the federal arts agency that awards WESTAF a block grant of approximately $1.6 million per year. The NEA has long been relatively easy to work with and, if it needs one thing, it is communication with members of Congress regarding the good work that the dollars the NEA distributes through WESTAF do for the region.

- The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) is a national service organization that is largely driven by the executive directors of state arts agencies. NASAA is organized as a service organization for the nation’s state and territorial arts agencies. The organization is a primary source of data on the grantmaking of state arts agencies and also a resource on the annual legislative appropriations to the agencies. Executive directors of state arts agencies affiliated with WESTAF often serve on the NASAA board.

- Americans for the Arts (AFTA) is a national membership organization that broadly advocates for the arts in American life. AFTA is important to WESTAF because it has an interest in the development of more effective arts-advocacy mechanisms at the state level. The beneficiary of a $100 million contribution, AFTA is expected to play an
increasing role in the repositioning of the arts in the lives of Americans.

- WESTAF is one of six U.S. regional arts organizations (RAOs). The executive directors of the organizations meet in person approximately three times a year and via telephone another three times. In addition, the group holds an annual planning session. The development of cooperative activity among the RAO group has been very slow; however, WESTAF’s position on fostering strong communication among them is that the RAOs need to be visible and appear as solid investments for the NEA because, if they do not, other interests may suggest that the funds allocated to the RAOs be used for their purposes.

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