

Strategic Planning for Regional Collaboration in a Time of Change

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Background:

In April, 2011, the Association of Western State Folklorists (AWSF) convened in Virginia City. The volunteer-run organization is comprised of folklorists and others engaged in folklore and cultural heritage programming and documentation throughout the West. Most members in the group work for state government, universities or non-profits, and a small handful are self-employed. AWSF meets nearly every year, enabling its members to gather for collegial networking, peer learning and information sharing. WESTAF provides some travel subsidy assistance for the group's meeting. In addition, AWSF has a listserv and Facebook page that allows members to maintain ongoing communication throughout the year. Many in the group are close friends, remain in regular contact, and assist each other on varied periodic projects.

Given the prolonged economic downturn, many in the public folklore field (and in the arts and humanities in general) are facing serious fiscal challenges. Many state arts agencies are experiencing severe budget cuts, reorganization, staff reductions and even elimination in some cases. Most folklore non-profits are experiencing budget cuts and a reduction in grants and contributions. For example, the Utah Arts Council eliminated their long-standing folk arts program and the Washington State Arts Commission will likely reduce staff and sustain budget cuts over 70%. On the other hand, the Oregon Folk Arts Program, which ceased to exist a few years ago, has now reorganized and found a home at the University of Oregon. They are also testing new networked partnership models of operation. In response to this climate of uncertainty and change, the membership of AWSF decided to engage in strategic planning discussion about the future of AWSF and adaptation to change was a major theme of the meeting.. In particular, the group wanted to identify ways in which AWSF can engage in meaningful regional collaboration that furthers the field of folklore and assists its members.

That said, it should be noted that strategic planning comes in many forms, depending on the goals and nature of the group involved. In the case of AWSF—a loose-knit, volunteer-run regional association that meets once a year—strategic planning was more generally focused on clarifying general interests and directions for future collaboration. In the beginning stages of planning, building common understandings and a general consensus for group action is critical. An initial presentation and planning discussion facilitated by Betsy Peterson laid the foundation for additional membership discussion which identified a range of regional collaborations for the group to pursue. To some degree, the planning discussion allowed the group to know and understand itself better; that is, to articulate what they are individually and collectively, examine how they engage with each other and their environment, and identify current obstacles and assets, and opportunities for future collaboration.

Suggestions for Collaborative Regional Planning:

1. **Establish baseline data and information about the group.** In other words, do your homework. Who is in the group? What are the basic characteristics, interests and concerns of the group? How do they view themselves? What are their visions of the future?

For the AWSF meeting, Peterson and Christina Barr developed a brief survey of the group that was administered in advance via survey monkey. Besides gathering basic information (age, education, place of work, income changes, etc.), the survey also asked basic questions to identify attitudes about the future, geographic focus of work, types of existing collaboration and networks, and connectivity to other groups. Of 31 people attending, 21 people responded. While some findings were expected (the group in general is aging, income decreased or remained flat for the vast majority of respondents, etc.), other responses provided new information. For instance, the vast majority of participants carry out work that is local or state-based in focus. While many retain involvement in regional or national work, it is not a first (or even second) priority. Few are doing international work. In response to a question about existing partnerships and collaborations, the top three sectors/fields cited as common partners for respondents were tourism, historic preservation and education (whether primary, secondary or higher education). Finally, in response to a question about the future, virtually all respondents acknowledged the current economic challenges and general uncertainty. Indeed, a handful of respondents suggested they may not be working in the field five years from now, but most feel cautiously optimistic about the future of the field. Clearly, capturing attitudes and data that express the group's sense of itself are essential if any group wants to develop meaningful collaborations.

2. **Understand the Environment.** Develop a framework or context that allows the group to situate itself in a broader field of action. What are the social, political, economic and cultural contexts of the group's work? What are the external forces and trends shaping our work life? Understanding and managing massive change was an underlying thread of the session and thus a framework of adaptive cycles (growth, conservation, release/destruction, rebirth/reorganization), borrowed from systems theory, was used to discuss the changes occurring in public folklore. Peterson suggested that public folklore in its current configuration (emphasizing government arts infrastructure) has reached the end of a prolonged period of growth and is now in a period of flux and reorganization. As established infrastructure is contracting, opportunities in previously unexplored fields are emerging. With experimentation, new models will emerge that are potentially replicable. Resiliency is the greater issue for the field going forward. Peterson also focused on external forces, with specific emphasis on the following topics and their relationship to the field:

-Demographics/Globalization. The communities we work with are more diverse, more mobile, more porous. How do we think about tradition, identity, community, pop culture in this context?

-Technology and Communications. Analog to Digital. Seismic change and permanent realignment in communication methods and style. Greater emphasis on interactivity, immediacy of information exchange. How will this affect programming and scholarship?

-The Social Contract is Changing/has changed. Rise of neo-liberal/free market approaches. Privatization, devolution and decentralization have changed the way in which resources are distributed. Public resources, institutions and services are shrinking and attitudes about the value of government are changing; nonprofit models are fragile. New ways of working emphasize contract labor, project/team orientation, and serial jobs. In this context, how do we work to ensure the viability of the profession?

-Disintermediation/Rise of Participatory Culture and "Networked Individualism"

With greater interactivity, we see growth in individualized agency, choice and participation; the contestation of curatorial and gatekeeping authority; entrepreneurial innovation; expert vs. lay knowledge. How does this affect the folklorist's interpretive role and our notions of folklore and tradition as community activity? How do we talk more forcefully and directly about change and creativity?

3. Assess the Current practice. How does the group think about and do its work?

When groups begin to think about collaboration, it is important for them to critically examine the underlying assumptions and ideas animating their work. At the AWSF meeting, the group focused on the concepts and dichotomies that have animated folklore practice for the past few decades, the ways in which we make the case for our work, as well as the roles of folklorists. In particular, the group focused on the seminal concepts of community, tradition, change and creativity. Globalization and continual rapid changes in communication and technology are fostering greater mobility, permeable cultural and nation-state boundaries, and cross cultural exchange as they also privilege more visible individual choice and voice. In response, many public folklorists are thinking about tradition and community as negotiated concepts and processes and developing their programming in an according manner. While many folklorists have implicitly embraced these ideas for awhile, many are becoming more vocal and explicit in their practice and embracing more fluid definitions of community and tradition. As one individual observed, we are moving away from monolithic ideas of community to a sense of networked individualism. Another referenced "individual heterogeneity," acknowledging the fact that we all belong to multiple communities in our daily lives.

The discussion of definitions was complicated by the problems posed by case-making. Case making is often dependent on the funding environment for our work and for most public folklorists (or cultural heritage workers), survivalist or "endangered culture" concepts have been the dominant rhetorical strategy for garnering support, but how does the field counter the sense of stasis that is often associated with preservation? While preservation is a legitimate and integral work focus in this field, folklorists agreed that we need to consider the dimension of dynamism and emergence in our work as well. More broadly, we need to forward a larger range of functions and outcomes that speak to the public value of our work and engage the public in more diverse ways. Several folklorists are developing collaborations with researchers and sectors beyond the arts that allow for a more comprehensive demonstration of folklore's public value (in economic development, public health and historic preservation to name a few) as contributing to the vitality and viability of communities.

The group also focused on the role of public folklorist as facilitator vs. interpreter/curator, discussing ways in which folklorists exert and share authority. In keeping with the discussions of community and tradition, virtually everyone is confronting issues related to interpretive authority. Again, with changes in technology and with the rise of diverse types of community-based organizations, communities and individuals expect greater control and voice in the public presentation of their resources. For many folklorists this has meant actively engaging in facilitation and brokerage

4. Outline the Networks and Resources of the Group.

Ideally, a vibrant community of practice depends on a web of relationships and a diverse network of individuals and organizations, and emergent collaborative projects facilitate practice that is greater than the sum of the individual partners. Yet, many work communities do not fully understand or appreciate the ways in which their communities operate as networks. In most instances, networks develop without a plan. Left unmanaged, most networks develop according to principles of “like attracts like” and people in close proximity form ties, which encourages a dense network that minimizes diversity, experimentation and access to new resources. While the public folklore field exhibits some of these characteristics, it does indeed have multiple connections and ties to other fields and sectors which are not fully developed or used.

According to the survey administered before the meeting, most AWSF members collaborate with a range of fields on an ongoing basis, with tourism, historic preservation and education being the most common partners (followed by performing arts and community development). Yet most of these collaborations remain at the local or state level. The group discussed ways in which they can begin to better understand their own networks in preparation for regional collaboration. Borrowing from consultant June Holley, Betsy mentioned that the group needs to know the network (map it) and knit the network (identify ways to strengthen and broaden the connections).

The group also discussed new sources of funding for the field. With the demise in state and federal funding—primary support systems for the field—public folklore will need to diversify its funding base. Betsy talked about foundations and individual donor funds and the democratization of philanthropy. The group talked about the emergence of the Cargill Foundation. With access to social media, donors are engaging more actively with grantees and expecting more information and transparency. While this type of philanthropy offers great opportunities for the field (in terms of tapping new audiences and supporters), it is a different type of fundraising that will require the development of new skills and strategies.

5. Identify Opportunities for Group Collaboration.

After the group has considered the characteristics, practices and interests of its membership, examined the environment, and identified existing networks and resources, it can then begin to shape an agenda for collaborative action. At the end of the AWSF meeting, the group had an opportunity to discuss

collaborative projects in greater detail. While many options and ideas were shared, a general consensus emerged about criteria for regional collaboration which emphasized crossing state borders/boundaries and less dependence on government support. Collaborative activity clustered in three primary areas:

- Projects allowing the group to map, research and more fully identify regional networks for collaboration. Simply put, who is working with whom? Which fields are common partners for folklore in the West? How and where do they intersect? Are their central hubs of activity in the region with opportunity for growth? Are leaders and relationships emerging in particular fields or states that deserve further cultivation? Where are the gaps?

Examples here include: regional network mapping project (in collaboration with WESTAF or other entity); developing more comprehensive demographic data of relevance to the field.

- Projects that encourage greater connectivity and strengthen existing networks or resources.

Examples here include: an AWSF Facebook Project; the reactivation of a regional archiving assessment project; or forming partnerships with organizations such as TAAC (The Association of American Cultures) or NALAC (National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures).

- Projects that reflect current issues/realities in the American West which provide concrete vehicles for collaborative thematic programs.

Examples here include: a Water in the West project; Horse Culture; a project on the 150th anniversary of the transcontinental railroad in 2019; developing a regional Smithsonian Festival program; an America Works regional collaboration (occupational culture projects related to the American Folklife Center project).

In combination the three types of collaboration identified by AWSF complement each other. Mapping projects will allow AWSF to better understand their membership and their connections with allied fields. An emphasis on better connectivity will allow AWSF to strengthen and expand their networks through regular communication and increase visibility for the group and the field. A group project will provide the opportunity to give the first two goals a tangible form. It reinforces the knowledge gathering and connectivity with a concrete collaborative project/product that demonstrates the collective assets of the group and positions it well for future activity.