

Vermont Folklife Center AFS Infrastructure Report

Submitted by Andy Kolovos and Kathleen Haughey

Introduction

In Spring of 2012 the Board of Trustees of the Vermont Folklife Center (VFC) appointed Gregory Sharrow and Andy Kolovos to the positions of Co-Executive Directors of the organization. As they explored their new responsibilities, Kolovos and Sharrow hoped to create a more lateral and democratic internal organization for VFC with the goal of broadening out decision making and sharing executive responsibilities among all VFC staff. What followed were several years of ad-hoc experimentation that produced many organizational successes as well as a heightened sense of staff cohesion and engagement. However, as VFC sought to hire new staff members it became clear that the ad-hoc processes of the past would need to be rendered more transparent, be better structured, and more formalized. To this end VFC staff members began to search for models of decentralized organizational systems they could use to inform the establishment of a new organizational structure for VFC.

In the Spring of 2015 Andy Kolovos took part in AFS-supported, Preserving America's Cultural Traditions (PACT)-sponsored retreat in Chicago. At the retreat, Kolovos had extensive conversations with Philadelphia Folklore Project Executive Director, Selina Morales about a similar effort being undertaken at PFP with support of Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA). After conferring with AFS about the availability of funds, VFC reached out to AORTA and to the consultant, Jenna Peters-Golden, with whom PFP had been already been engaged.

VFC contracted with Peters-Golden to guide VFC staff through a day-long retreat and extended off-site support where staff would work with Peters-Golden to frame a new internal operating structure.

Over the course of our award period VFC staff met with Peters-Golden seven times in person or over Skype, and communicated with her regularly over email to guide and frame our decision making.

The work of exploring how we might reframe the internal operating structure of VFC has been an interesting, exciting and at times frustrating process—and “process” it will continue to be. We thank AFS for making this work possible.

Rationale for Exploring Alternative Organizational Structures

We believe strongly that the internal organizational structures of the organizations in our field should mirror the values we advocate through our work.

This underlying belief serves as the primary rationale for our efforts to reframe the internal structure at VFC.

If we argue for equitable collaboration and open partnership with the communities with whom we work, we should expect no less from each other in the daily operations of our workplaces.

If we advocate for the recognition of all voices in the diverse cultural communities we serve, we should aspire to have our own professional relationships mirror this goal.

The traditional, top-down non-profit structure that places an executive director in a hierarchy above professional staff can be effective, but it also reinforces assumptions about authority and power.

Kolovos has been engaged with discussions rooted in this—and other moral and ethical priorities—for the field for several years. In collaboration with Selina Morales of the Philadelphia Folklore Project, Lisa Rathje of

Overview of work with AORTA

As noted above, we learned about AORTA through Selina Morales of the Philadelphia Folklore Project. In June of 2015 we made initial contact with Jenna Peters-Golden of AORTA via email and telephone. Staff and Peters-Golden then planned and held a full-day retreat in Middlebury, VT on August 12, 2015. Peters-Golden travelled to VT from Philadelphia and met with staff in person over the course of the day.

Beginning in September 2016 VFC Staff began to hold weekly, structured **Collective Meetings** in place of our previous, occasional staff meetings. The program/structure of these Collective Meetings follows suggestions laid out by Peters-Golden in the August retreat. Additionally, we constituted our organizational **Pods** and began to experiment with Pod meetings and the role and function of Pods within the organization.

Following the retreat, VFC Director of Education, Kathleen Haughey assumed primary responsibility for communicating with Peters-Golden, and she reached out to Peters-Golden on several occasions to get advice and receive feedback on VFC staff efforts. On September 14, 2015 Peters-Golden and Haughey met for an hour over Skype to discuss facilitation techniques and methods that align with lateral and democratic meeting structures. Haughey then passed along these ideas to the rest of the VFC staff. On September 23, Peters-Golden and Haughey met for two hours over Skype to review the VFC Personnel and Human Resources policy manual. Peters-Golden gave Haughey feedback on this document and suggested how to revise VFC's HR policies in order to reflect the lateral organizational structure toward which we are working. On January 7th, 2016, Peters-Golden, Haughey, and Ned Castle (VFC Programming

Associate/Development Coordinator) met over Skype for two hours to outline an agenda and discuss facilitation techniques for our second, half-day retreat, held on February 2, 2016. Peters-Golden participated in this retreat remotely via Skype and we explored the unfolding process of implementing our more lateral organizational structure, and looked to Peters-Golden for suggestions and insight into how to improve our working structure.

Since the second retreat, Haughey and Castle have been in communication with Peters-Golden for additional assistance in relation to our efforts. Haughey and Castle met with Peters-Golden again via Skype on April 7, 2016 for two hours to discuss plans for a third retreat where we will discuss the process, impact and effectiveness of the developing more-lateral structure.

Draft Organizational Structure of The Vermont Folklife Center

Organizational Governance

The Vermont Folklife Center operates under a traditional set of non-profit bylaws that define organizational governance in terms of a Board of Trustees who hire an Executive Director charged with management of the affairs of the organization. Because of the framing of the bylaws, the organizational work the staff is undertaking focuses solely on the division of responsibilities and decision making as related to programming and daily operations, not organizational governance. We anticipate VFC will continue to function from an external governance perspective as it has in the past—with Trustees and an appointed Executive Director.

The VFC Trustees are aware, and supportive, of the staff's efforts to explore new models of internal organization. The staff, in turn, recognizes the Trustees ultimate authority in determining executive leadership of the organization. As such, the role of "Executive Director" (or in the case of our current operating structure "Co-Executive Directors") remains intact in our work in progress.

Current Staff Profile

VFC currently supports the following staff positions:

- **Administrative Associate** (Bob Hooker): 1 FTE
- **Co-Director** (Gregory Sharrow): 1 FTE
- **Co-Director and Archivist** (Andy Kolovos): .75 FTE
- **Director of Education** (Kathleen Haughey): 1 FTE
- **Finance Director** (Deborah Laframboise): Contract Hourly
- **Philanthropic Outreach Coordinator** (Beth Knox): .5 FTE
- **Programming Associate/Development Coordinator** (Ned Castle): 1 FTE

Additionally, VFC supports a part time Assistant Archivist (Madeliene Winterfalcon), contract-based Education Program support staff (Myles Jewell and Scott Miller), a variety of individuals who work in our shop and gallery on weekends and during staff vacations, and a number of Federal Work Study students from Middlebury College and the University of Vermont.

At the time of writing this report several of these positions are in flux due to staffing transitions, but the outline above reflects the nature of the organizational staff over the period of the work outlined here.

Departments, Pods, and the Collective

The basic structure developed by VFC staff divides organizational activities into larger conceptual units termed **Departments**, and then divides each Department into a series of **Pods** through which Departmental activities are governed and executed.

Within the developing structure there also exists the **Collective** which meets to address Pod activities and discuss, plan and execute matters that relate to broad organizational need.

The Departments that structure the organizational activity of the Vermont Folklife Center are:

- **Administration**
- **Archive and Research**
- **Education**
- **Vision & Voice**

Below I provide detail on each of the Departments and their associated Pods.

Administration

Administration Pods

- Development
- Facilities
- Finance
- Human Resources
- Branding/Marketing/PR
- Strategic Plan
- Website Redesign

The Administration department is a distinction used to organize activities related to the day-to-day operations of the Vermont Folklife Center. Included under it are work functions related to fundraising, facilities management, HR and institutional marketing.

Some Administration Pods govern core, ongoing work activities are therefore standing, such as Development, Facilities, Finance, Human Resources and Branding/Marketing/PR. Others, such as Strategic Plan and Website Redesign are project-based and therefore presumed to be terminal.

Development Pod: Includes all staff members whose work responsibilities relate to organizational fundraising activities including solicitation of major gifts, fundraising mailings, general operations grant writing, and events.

Facilities Pod: Oversees maintenance and repair of VFC real property.

Finance Pod: Oversees staff-side of VFC annual budget and budgetary compliance.

Human Resources Pod: Drafts changes to the VFC Personnel Policy Manual for submission to Board consideration. Addresses staff HR complaints and interpersonal issues among staff.

Branding/Marketing/PR Pod: Oversees strategy for public perception and presentation of VFC.

Strategic Plan Pod: Oversees implementation of Board-approved Strategic Growth Plan, including Plan-related fundraising goals. Works with Development and Finance Pod.

Website Redesign Pod: Oversees redevelopment of VFC website.

Archive and Research

Archive and Research Pods

- Archive
- Research
- Contracts

The Archive and the VFC's ongoing fieldwork/research work have historically been linked, hence we continued that tradition by tying these two sets of overlapping activity together in our developing organizational structure.

Archive Pod: Develops annual priorities for work in the VFC Archive, oversees archival activity.

Research Pod: Oversees activities related to research/fieldwork on mission-related topics conducted by VFC staff members and similar efforts conducted by unpaid partners. Sets annual priorities for the focus of research activities.

Contracts Pod: Oversees work-for-hire activities by VFC staff members, with emphasis placed on work-for-hire interviewing, cultural documentation and media production.

Education

- Apprenticeship
- Discovering Community
- Internships
- Workshops

The Vermont Folklife Center’s Education program governs four areas of VFC programmatic work—the Vermont Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, Discovering Community (our program that provides ethnographic and media production training to K-14 students and educators), our Internship program and our annual Cultural Sustainability Institute Workshop series which is directed at the general public.

Apprenticeship Pod: Sets annual priorities for VT Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Provides feedback and advice to the program director.

Discovering Community Pod: Sets annual priorities for formal school outreach program, plans and executes annual Discovering Community Summer Institute for Educators, provides feedback and advice to VFC Director of Education regarding the program.

Internships Pod: Oversees and develops VFC internship policies.

Workshops Pod: Coordinates and plans annual Cultural Sustainability Institute Workshop series.

Vision & Voice

- Exhibits
- Media Production

“Vision & Voice” refers to our Vision & Voice Documentary Workspace—a physical gallery and conceptual space for exhibits and documentary media production.

Exhibits Pod: Oversees annual exhibit schedule, plans and develops exhibits, oversees travelling exhibitions.

Media Production Pod: Oversees our media production outreach efforts including production for radio, podcasts and other efforts.