

Letter from America Summer 2011

In light of the shocking funding cuts to NAWA recently, I thought it might be enlightening to investigate cuts to arts funding here in the US. We don't have as much governmental arts funding over here in the first place, mind you – at least not proportionally. This is a country suspicious of government involvement in anything. And with a robust right-wing demographic, we not only have trouble agreeing on what art is, but also on whether we value it enough to fund it. To paraphrase: *Why should I fund your art?*

The current financial crisis provided an excellent opportunity for Republicans, who have tried on numerous previous occasions to do away with federal funding for the arts, to try once again. In February, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed a 2011 budget resolution that would do away with the Arts in Education program within the Department of Education and would slash one quarter of the budget for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

The Arts in Education program funds organizations whose missions are to foster greater awareness about the need for arts programs for people with disabilities. It also provides support for the child and youth programs at The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

The NEA has so many culturally enriching initiatives that it would be impossible to enumerate them all. They sponsor a program that helps military members write about their wartime experiences; they make it possible for touring Shakespeare companies to visit rural areas; they organize a “Jazz in the Schools” program. Moreover, they offer \$25,000 grants to a few lucky writers each year, making it possible for those writers to focus more exclusively on their creative work. It's one of the only literary opportunities of its kind in the United States.

Thankfully, a House resolution isn't the final word. Its resolution must be reconciled with a Senate resolution. Thus, there have been several months of political wrangling. Prominent figures like Alec Baldwin and Kevin Spacey made public appeals and traveled to Capitol Hill in Washington, DC to defend funding for the arts.

The Senate is a very different animal from the House. Radical change doesn't tend to occur there. As a result, the cuts don't look as dire as they did initially. The NEA receives 155 million dollars, down from 161 million, a 7.5% cut. The Arts in Education program stays alive with a 25 million dollar budget, down from 40 million. Both the Public Broadcasting System and the Smithsonian will retain previous levels of funding.

In the meantime, states are also slashing. In May, Wisconsin passed a measure to reduce arts funding by 66%. Texas has also proposed cuts to arts funding.

We can, it seems, breathe a collective sigh of relief that the federal programs didn't go the way of Wisconsin – for the moment. Negotiations about the 2012 fiscal year, which begins in October, have undoubtedly already begun.

I find myself thinking how ingenious it is for conservatives to use these tactics. Here we all are – *grateful* for a 7.5% cut to the NEA and a 37.5% cut to Arts in Education. Not indignant. Not motivated to protest. Who's really the winner here? If cuts continue at this rate, it will only take a few years to zero out the budgets of these organizations.

It would be easy to rail about the value of the arts and the short-sightedness of the funding bodies, but the readers of this magazine already understand these concepts. Instead it might be worth raising this question: What can we (those of us in the field) do about the perceived disposability of the arts, during hard times or otherwise? It appears to be a trans-Atlantic PR problem – one worth exploring at the next NAWA or AWP conference.

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