

Illinois Equitable Grant Making Assessment Initiative
Constituent Interviews Report ◀

Prepared for the Illinois Arts Council by the
National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

December 2023



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This report was prepared by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies in partnership with the Illinois Arts Council.



Cover photo: The Gordons perform at the Midwest Folk Festival in Bishop Hill, photo by Lou Lourdeau

Introduction

In 2023, the Illinois Arts Council (IAC) and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) embarked on the Equitable Grant Making Assessment Initiative (EGAIN). EGAIN is a collaborative effort to examine the agency's grant making through an equity lens, in order to identify funding gaps and recommend strategies that the agency can pursue to reduce barriers to arts support. EGAIN is a mixed-method assessment that includes both quantitative and qualitative components. The aims of the initiative are to:

- Analyze the demographic distribution of IAC's general operating support awards (unrestricted grants that provide support to an organization as a whole rather than funding a particular project).
- Engage IAC constituents in providing feedback about their needs, experiences and perceptions.
- Identify equity strengths and weaknesses in IAC's approach to general operating support funding.
- Recommend applied actions IAC can take to work toward greater grant-making equity.
- Serve as an evidence base in the agency's case for the resources needed to reach more Illinois communities with state support.

This report summarizes the findings of one component: the constituent interviews. These interviews were conducted with Illinois based organizations that serve BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and/or people of color), rural, low-income, and/or disability populations with arts programming. Representatives from 38 organizations successfully signed up and completed these interviews, from September 6 – October 5, 2023. The interview protocol included questions about:

- IAC grant history (or lack thereof),
- respondent programs and services,
- beneficiaries served (including populations who are BIPOC, rural, low-income or disabled),
- difficulties experienced when applying to the IAC for funds,
- perceptions about data collection (including applicant and beneficiary demographics), and
- suggestions for making IAC grants process easier to navigate.

Initial findings from the interviews were presented in a project briefing to select IAC staff and board members on October 26, 2023. This report includes a written version of the same information that was shared in the briefing and serves as a summary of that session. The "Other Topics" section of this report contains additional information (beyond what was shared during the briefing) that may be informative to IAC staff and board members as they seek to implement equity strategies.

Who Was Interviewed?

Recruitment Process

A list of prospective interviewees was assembled with recommendations from IAC staff and board members. In addition, respondents to the constituent survey fielded earlier in the summer were invited to volunteer for an interview. This process resulted in an initial list of over 100 organizations.

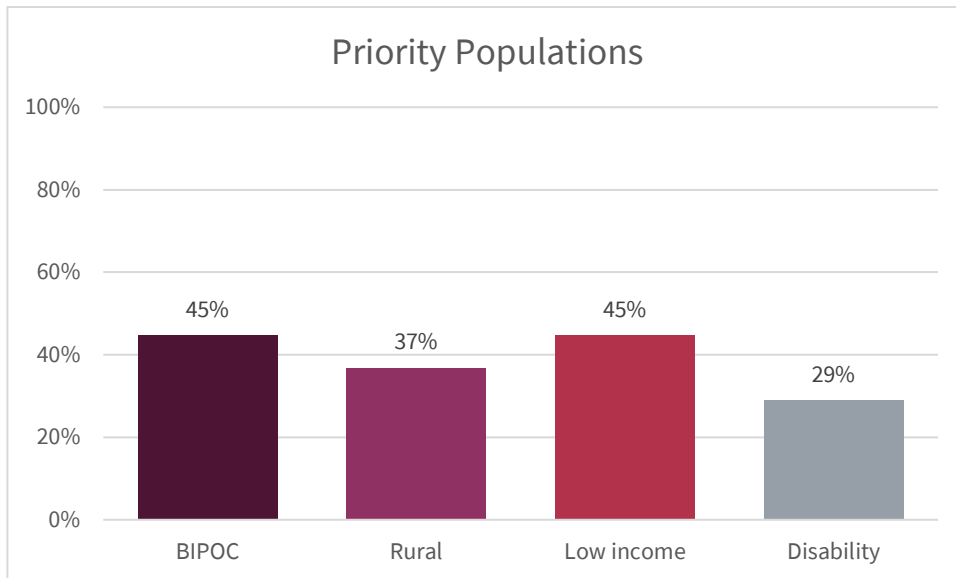
This list was further narrowed for recruitment based on the desired demographic profile of organizations:

- 40 organizations in total (38 ultimately responded)
- 8+ BIPOC organizations, serving different races/ethnicities
- 8+ rural organizations, distributed across the state
- 8+ low-income-serving organizations
- 8+ disabled-serving organizations
- 8-12 non-operating support grantees
- 8-12 non-arts organizations
- mix of artistic disciplines and budget sizes

The summary charts in the next sections show the specific demographics of organizations interviewed.

In addition to the above demographics, the interviews revealed that there were varying levels of understanding and interaction with IAC. Some had long-standing, close relationships with the agency. Others had never directly communicated with staff and knew very little about the current funding opportunities available, or only knew what they had read on the IAC website.

Summary Charts



Priority Populations Served by Interviewees

For the purposes of describing organizations interviewed, the following definitions were used:

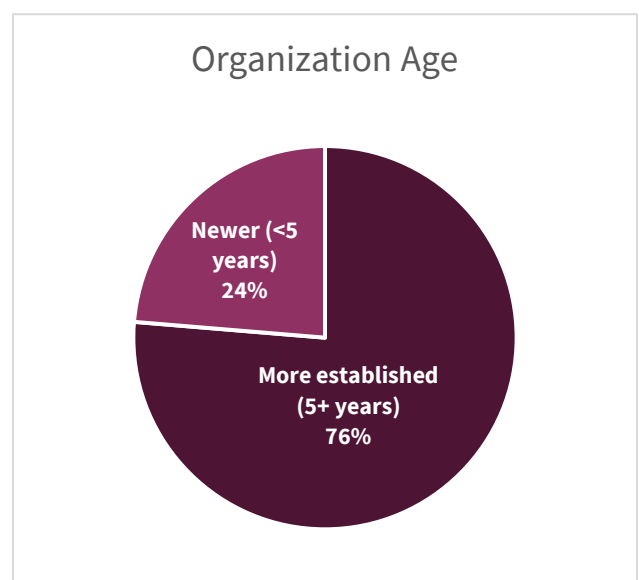
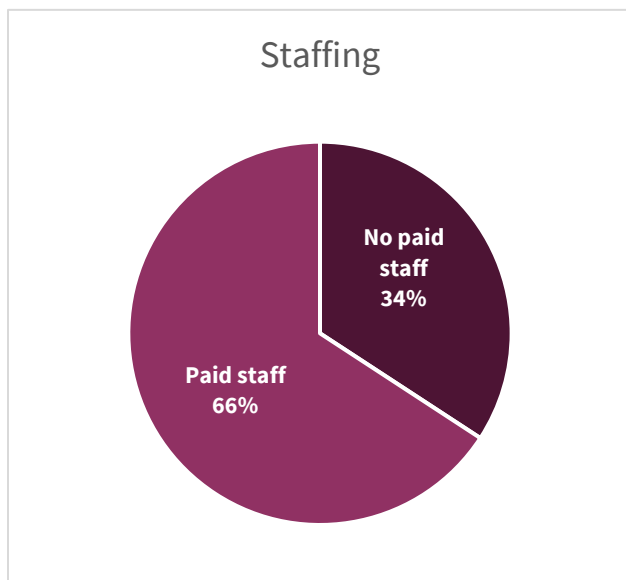
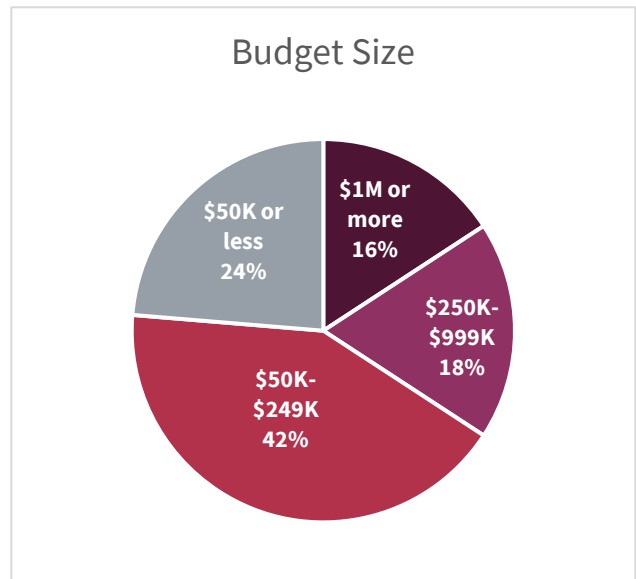
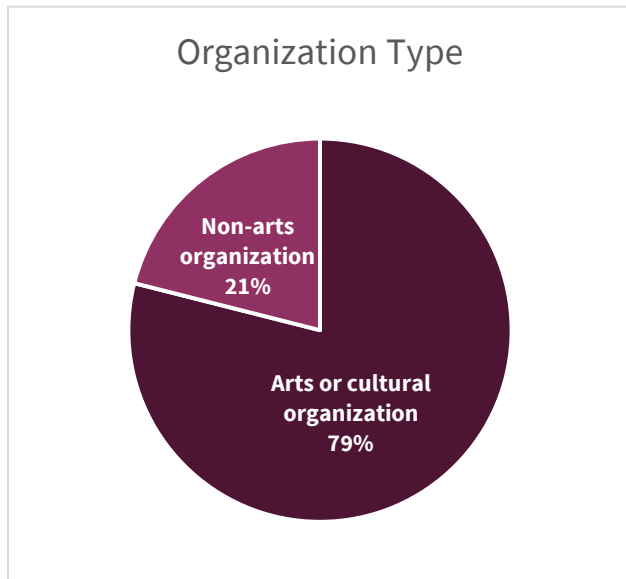
BIPOC: The staff/board/community served is majority BIPOC or there is explicit support for BIPOC communities. Some organizations in this category broadly served communities of color, while others explicitly named African American, Latinx and Native American populations. Although multiple organizations that appeared to explicitly serve Asian or Asian American populations were identified and invited to interview, none responded to the request.

Rural: The staff/board/community served is located in a rural county, using regions defined by the federal government. This definition is the same one used for the grants data analysis component of the EGAIN project. The 14 rural organizations interviewed were from 14 different counties across the northern and southern parts of the state (regions A and D from the regional designations used by IAC for the Partners in Excellence program).

Low-income: The organization explicitly supports low-income participants or is located in a low-income community.

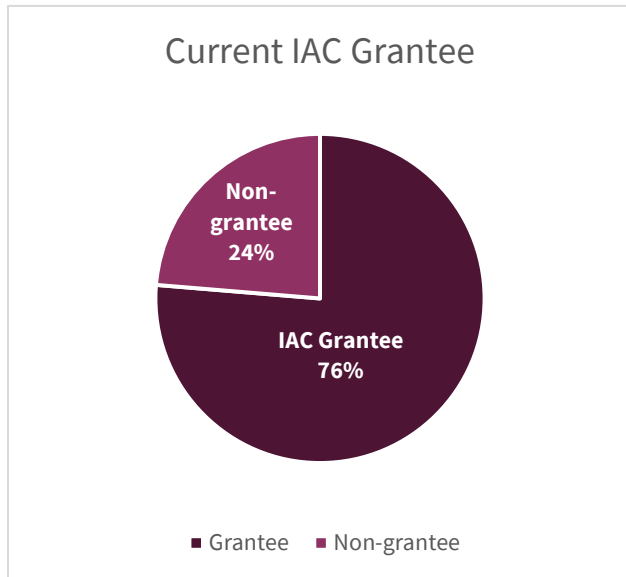
Disability: The community served is majority disabled or there is explicit support for people with disabilities. Some organizations in this category broadly served people with disabilities. Others explicitly stated that they served people with intellectual disabilities, people with physical disabilities, and patients in hospital settings.

Interviewee Characteristics

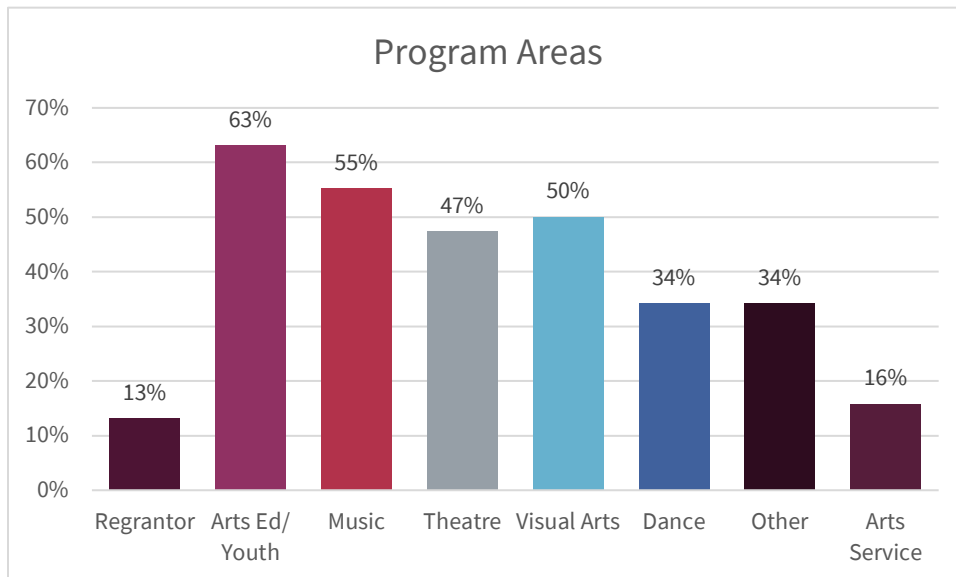


No paid staff: Organization is volunteer run and did not have paid fundraising or other administrative staff. Many of these organizations, however, did pay artists and program contractors/staff.

IAC Relationship



Non-grantees included those that were not sure whether they had received an award.



The above chart reflects what interviewees shared when describing their programs and services. It does not necessarily reflect the program areas that are used when applying to IAC programs, other than the "regrantor" category. "Regrantor" indicates those organizations that participate in the Community Arts Access decentralized funding program.

Comparison to Survey Respondents

While there was some overlap between survey respondents and interviewees, the overall profile of these two groups was different. The survey respondent group was representative of IAC's overall organizational constituency, while the interview group included only those serving the four priority populations. A few statistics comparing the two:

	Survey	Interviews
Number of Organizations	376	38
Organization Characteristics		
Arts or cultural organization	84%	79%
Non-arts organization	16%	21%
Geography		
Urban	93%	63%
Rural	7%	37%
Budget Size		
\$50K or less	24%	24%
\$50K - \$249K	28%	42%
\$250K - \$999K	25%	18%
\$1M or more	23%	16%
History with IAC		
Have received IAC grant award	89%	76%
Have not received award (or not sure)	11%	24%

The two groups differed in a few ways:

- A higher percentage of rural organizations were present in the interview group (37%) compared to the survey group (7%). Rural organizations were intentionally recruited for the interviews, with a goal of at least 20%.
- A higher percentage of organizations that had never received an IAC grant were present in the interview group (24%) compared to the survey group (11%). Non-grantees were intentionally recruited for the interviews, with a goal of at least 20%.

- The budget sizes for the interview group were much lower overall. The largest-budget organization in the interview group was approximately \$2 million. In comparison, there were eight organizations among survey respondents with budgets greater than \$20 million.

Interview Themes

The remainder of this report summarizes feedback shared during the interviews, organized thematically. Representative quotes are included where appropriate to illustrate a particular theme; all quotes have been edited for clarity and to maintain anonymity. When it would be helpful for context and would not reveal identifying information, some demographic information about the organization quoted is provided in parentheses following the comment.

General Positive Feedback

Overall

Almost universally, IAC was considered to be a positively impactful agency. The overall tone of all interviews was a desire to see IAC have greater impact on the arts and communities across the state.

Selected quotes:

- The Illinois Arts Council Agency, I can't state it enough plays such a critical role in what we're doing here. (rural, grantee)
- Glad that IAC is including the WHOLE state of Illinois. (BIPOC/low-income, non-grantee)
- IAC knows the entire state better than anyone, they are poised to do something with this. (BIPOC/disability, long-time grantee)

Staff Appreciation

IAC staff were considered very responsive. Some interviewees named the specific staff that they had worked with, these included people at all levels of seniority and from leadership, programs and grants teams. Regardless of seniority, department or tenure, the language used to describe staff interactions indicated that interviewees viewed them as in a position of power and authority.

Selected quotes:

- Staff are very responsive. Whenever I have questions I always receive a quick response. (stated by many organizations of different types)

- I had to communicate with [staff name] about a complex issue. [Name] was very accessible, understanding, human. (BIPOC/low-income, grantee)
- [Staff name] is our hero. (rural, grantee)

Listening Tour

Several interviewees noted that they had participated in the listening tour and shared how they felt about the experience. Interviewees expressed gratitude for the opportunity to interact with the agency in a personalized setting, and to have the opportunity to gather their community. Note that at the time of the interviews (September 2023), all the listening tour stops were in rural communities.

Selected quotes:

- Staff came to [nearby town] for a meeting, it was so great to see them in person. We felt connected to each other and to them.
- They did a listening tour stop in our community, we invited teachers and artists. It feels like they know us, that matters too.
- They came for the listening tour, it was extremely valuable. I feel more comfortable reaching out to them, it alleviated the barrier of not knowing people. It was important that the meeting was in person, maybe subsequent meetings can be virtual.

Current (FY2023) Process

Positives

There were some interviewees that had positive comments about the current process. Those that had experience with other state agencies or grant applications felt that IAC's process was relatively easy to navigate. Those that had received operating support grants from IAC for several years observed that the process has become more streamlined and simpler over the years; there was strong acknowledgement of the agency's efforts in this regard.

Selected quotes:

- The process has become much more streamlined and simpler over the last several years (stated by many organizations that are long-time grantees, have capacity to manage grants process, range of budget sizes)
- It is a lot more streamlined compared to [City] grants process.
- IAC is much more on top of things than other state agencies.
- The NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] application is really cumbersome. Maybe four times more cumbersome than IAC. Especially since there is uncertainty about whether you will receive funding.

- The application is very typical. We do so many of these grants...we haven't found IAC's process very difficult.

Value of Operating Support

Interviewees shared examples of how IAC's operating support grants provided crucial support to the arts sector in Illinois. While the grant awards are not a substantial amount of any organization's operating budget, they are consistent and can be planned for. This is in contrast to private funds, which might be larger but often end after a few years, and more competitive grants.

Selected quotes:

- The award amount is not a lot, but it's that buffer that you need to make sure programs can happen. You know it's going to arrive. (rural/low-income, \$250-\$999K budget)
- This grant is the same amount of work as the \$50K grant, I still have the grant writer apply for it. The larger ones might go away, you aren't necessarily guaranteed funding. (BIPOC/low-income/disability, non-arts)
- When I was a panelist, I realized that IAC is in the 'yes' category, unlike some other funders. IAC wants to fund a lot of organizations. I could see how relatively small amounts of money could have big impact for some. (disability, non-arts)

Match Requirement

Most interviewees did not have an issue with the current match requirement. However, those that did expressed significant concerns about meeting the match. It is important to note that those that had concerns were all from rural communities and had smaller (less than \$50K) budgets.

Selected quotes:

- Our grant was cut one year because we didn't meet the match the previous year...we can't squeeze blood out of a turnip. (rural, <\$50K budget)
- You're punishing the low-income for being low-income. Because we can't match we can't get more money. (rural/low-income, <\$50K budget)
- The cash match is a challenge, in-kind would be easier. (rural, <\$50K budget)

GATA

Many interviewees did not see GATA (the Illinois Grant Accountability and Transparency Act) as a significant burden and some felt it had value. Those that expressed concerns were newer organizations. Those that had never applied viewed it as a possible barrier to accessing IAC funds.

Selected quotes:

- It's very important because you want to know that the dollars that are distributed are distributed to legitimate organizations. (rural, \$250K-\$999K budget, long-time grantee)
- Things like SAM [U.S. government's System for Award Management] and GATA are not a big deal because we have to do it for other grants. (non-arts, long-time grantee)
- I have had to go through a similar process for another grant... it's never gotten done. The extra steps can definitely trip people up. (<\$50K budget, non-grantee)
- That was difficult. We have been a nonprofit since 2019, navigating the nonprofit space has been a big learning curve. (\$50K-\$249K budget, first time grantee)

Panel

Most interviewees did not know very much about the panel process, including those that had received IAC grants for many years. Those that did have some understanding of the process were primarily people who had served as panelists. Some interviewees who had observed panel discussion in the past noted that they did not know how to access them now that panels were convened virtually.

Selected quotes:

- What's that? (rural, non-arts)
- How do you find the panel? I don't know how they do it. (disability, long-time grantee)
- I was a panelist last year. As it turns out, people with more money write better grants. Organizations who don't have a lot of resources don't have the resources to ask for money. I hope IAC is moving towards acknowledging that. (rural, \$50K-\$249K budget)
- The panel review process seems like a good idea but in practice it feels like the benchmarks change every year. You can get ranked differently from year to year, that is more about the review panel than the quality of applications. (BIPOC/low-income/disability, long-time grantee)
- Being a panelist gave me the opportunity to see how other organizations describe their work and get perspective on what is going on across the state. Is there a way that IAC could highlight programs more publicly, so it is not just the panelists who have the benefit of learning about them? (rural/low-income, \$250K-\$999K budget)

Award Amounts

Some interviewees inferred that their award amount was based primarily on their budget size. No one felt they had an actual understanding of how the amount was calculated. Several interviewees expressed frustration about the lack of transparency around this.

Selected quotes:

- How does our award amount get determined? I feel IAC has been generous because the amount has increased over the years. Is it because they have more funding or is it because they recognize our organization's need? (non-arts, \$1M+ budget, long-time grantee)
- After we got our first grant, I tried to get feedback. Could we have gotten more money if we had gotten a better panel score? Is it based on money available, budget size, or what? (rural, \$50K-\$249K budget)
- I haven't really thought about it because we always receive funding, that's a privilege we have as a grantee. (\$1M+ budget, long-time grantee)
- Absolutely no idea how it is calculated. I have asked for a list of grant awards, have never received an answer. Is it all going to Chicago? Who gets what and why? How did you decide this is what we should get? (rural, <\$50K budget, long-time grantee)

Time Line

There were varied levels of understanding about when to expect award announcements or receive funds. In general, larger-budget organizations with paid fundraising staff were better able to manage time-line expectations. While there were interviewees who expressed confusion about the time line, the issue seemed to be about organizational capacity (e.g., not having someone who could keep track) rather than poor communication from IAC. Grantees that had received grants for at least two years understood that the time line to receive funds could be quite lengthy and most did not have a problem dealing with that. Only one grantee mentioned significant cash flow issues if funds were received late.

Selected quotes:

- The timeline has been predictable so we can plan for it, that's been pretty good. (\$1M+ budget)
- You don't know how much money you are going to receive and you don't know when you will receive it. It's hard to figure out cash flow. (\$250K-\$999K budget)
- Having more clarity on dates would be great, even if the timeline is long. (\$50K-\$249K budget)
- I never know when we will get the award notification. This year was earlier? (\$250K-\$999K budget)

Eligibility

The understanding of eligibility requirements was inconsistent across interviews. Some interviewees that had never applied for funding stated that they were not eligible because of budget or organizational age requirements (note that IAC does not have a budget or organizational age minimum). Some grantees received personalized guidance from staff when they first began navigating the funding process.

Selected quotes:

- I was told that I have to go through the same process as established organizations. I was not told about anything streamlined for new nonprofits. (non-grantee, new organization)

- I spoke to a staff person who told us we wouldn't qualify for the first two years and that IAC could only grant up to what we had spent the previous year. (non-grantee, new organization)
- We thought we had to wait a few years to qualify because we didn't have enough history, but then IAC allowed us to apply for special projects funding. (grantee, arts)
- [Staff name] gave me a lot of guidance about how to get our arts project started. We received two years of special projects funding before applying for operating support. (grantee, non-arts)

Process Changes

New Applicants

Interviewees that had never applied for an IAC grant shared concerns about applying and responded to some suggestions for support. Several interviewees were hesitant to have detailed conversations with staff for fear that they were wasting time or risking their ability to secure a grant; others simply preferred to look at what was published on the website. Almost all prospective applicants expressed feelings of being overwhelmed about navigating IAC and an application process.

Selected quotes:

- We didn't ask [Staff name] many specific questions because we don't want to risk the chance of not getting funded.
- There is an IAC grant open right now, there is so much paperwork I don't know how I'm going to do it. It is overwhelming.
- People who write grants and know about the process have told me that my language is too simple. I need to use bigger words and use "college-ese" to explain my work.
- We are all volunteer so it's easy to miss deadlines and it's challenging to present ourselves in the best light.
- Initial grants should have a first phase that is informal. Maybe just a video upload from a phone.
- [Suggesting a video interview instead of written application] That would be like heaven on earth, that's a fantastic thought.
- [Suggesting that IAC offer grant writing support] Heck yes.

Multiyear Funding

The prospect of multiyear funding was overwhelmingly positive. Interviewees offered up examples of how this would impact them, including some concerns. One interviewee noted that the benefit of a full application every year was that it required the organization to regularly document their work in a way that a multiyear process would not require. A few interviewees wondered how the award calculation could be adjusted if their budget changed significantly. All interviewees that were asked about multiyear funding responded positively, and several interviewees raised this as a potential change on their own.

Selected quotes:

- If my internal recordkeeping is good that would be great. If my position turns over, that new person might be challenged to complete a full application.
- This sounds wonderful on the face of it. My budget is on a growth trajectory, would a multiyear grant end up being a regressive award?
- It would allow us to plan better, would allow program staff to try new things.
- Multiyear at larger amounts would be amazing. It's really hard to grow if our longstanding funders are not increasing their funding.
- It frees up time so that I can be out there with the programs.
- This would allow us to better forecast, beef up staff. We could scale, be more sustainable.

Increased Funding

The prospect of increased funding was overwhelmingly positive. Interviewees offered up examples of how this would impact them. Organizations that currently struggle to meet the match stated that they would not be able to accept a larger grant given the current requirements.

Selected quotes:

- If we received more funding we would need the match to be changed. We know how we would spend the money. (rural, low-income, <\$50K budget)
- We offer our programming for free. So anytime we can increase our operating budget to offset someone's salary or the resources that go into a school is absolutely terrific. So, yes. (BIPOC, \$1M+ budget)
- We are in a strategic planning process. In order to scale up we need a big infusion of cash. (disability, <\$50K budget)
- Our organization receives \$5K-\$6K. There are other organizations receiving \$30K...receiving \$30K would be community changing for us. (rural, \$50K-\$249K budget)

IAC Relationship

Overall, interviewees expressed a strong desire to develop a more substantive relationship with IAC. Many comments were invitations to visit their organization, see their programming, meet members of their community. Those that participated in a listening tour stop welcomed it as an opportunity for relationship-building. No one wanted a transactional relationship or to spend less time with IAC.

Selected quotes:

- I don't feel like that they actually know who we are. Come see what we do here. I know that's hard, but to have people come here and have a conversation, have them see one of the shows that we're doing, and even if it's every five years they come and do that, that would be great.

- It may be that we just don't know how to "do it" – how to invite IAC to have a more personal conversation, allow them to feel heard and get feedback.
- I wish they would come out here, I made a request to be on the listening tour.
- How can there be relationships between funders and organizations that go beyond transactional? I don't feel like I have a real relationship with IAC. I like it when it becomes more personal – I can share what we're working on, share progress.
- We're asking for a relationship, not a transaction. We've had good experience with [Foundation name], it has helped us understand their process better.

Connections with Others

Many interviewees expressed a desire for IAC to help build their networks across the state. Requests for connections included those to organizations with programs similar to theirs, organizations that worked with communities different from theirs, other funders.

Selected quotes:

- I love the One State conference, I am cured of my "downstate bias" when I attend. (BIPOC/disability, long-time grantee)
- Could IAC connect us to grantees doing similar work? I couldn't find a lot when I was getting this project started. (low-income, non-arts)
- [Foundation] had an initiative for black leaders. It included convenings, it's allowed me to connect with new funders. How can IAC be more involved in things like this? (BIPOC/low-income, non-grantee)

Demographics

Describing Community

Interviewees were invited to describe the communities their organizations served using their own words. ("How would you describe the populations or communities that you serve?") Some responses explicitly named the priority populations of this project:

- We directly serve people with disabilities in Chicago.
- The American Indian community
- Primarily serve the rural area of [County name]
- 90% of our population is Latinx or African American, 98% are at or below the poverty line.

Many interviewees chose to describe their community by naming a specific geography. These tended to be organizations led by people who lived in that geography and matched other demographics within that community.

- We are focused on the people in [City name].
- We promote the arts in [multicounty region].
- Our focus is on [Chicago neighborhood]. If you are checking off Census boxes, we serve primarily black but also Latino people.

Data Collection

The data collection methods that interviewees used varied as widely as the organizations themselves. Methods described ranged from the formal to the informal. Informal methods tended to be used by smaller-budget organizations, organizations with no paid staff and those with staff/board members who were a part of the community served. While some of the informal methods were necessitated by capacity constraints, many interviewees noted that their methods were appropriate to their community and that something more sophisticated would likely yield less desirable results.

Examples:

- **Surveys and formal interviews:** Interviewees with a smaller number of participants tended to use a structured interview to collect information, while those with larger numbers of participants tended to survey. Most interviewees with the interest and ability to formally collect data like this would also maintain a database, or at the very least an organized spreadsheet. One interviewee mentioned that their data collection process required special training and a database compliant with HIPAA (the U.S. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act).
- **State-required assessments:** Some interviewees worked with low-income populations or people with disabilities through a state referral process. These state processes included the collection of demographic data about each participant, which the interviewees had access to and/or were required to report on.
- **Census or school-provided data:** Interviewees that did not collect much data themselves would often rely on demographic data collected by other validated processes that described the underlying population of the geography in which they were located.
- **Informal feedback or unverified statements:** Several interviewees described informal processes for determining scholarship-/fee-reduction eligibility. A few noted that participants would state how much they could afford to pay but did not have to provide documentation. One interviewee noted that the most appropriate strategy in their context was to observe body language when describing the price of a program.
- **Visual scan or assumptions:** Several interviewees, particularly individuals who were a part of the community they were serving, noted that they felt comfortable simply doing a visual scan of their participants. These conversations were with organizations that designed their programs specifically for, with and by the priority populations.

Concerns

While discussing community demographics and data collection, interviewees raised some concerns about terminology and use of data. Some specific concerns were shared directly by interviewees; example quotes are below. In addition, it should be noted that when asked about community demographics, many interviewees assumed that this question was only about race/ethnicity.

Selected quotes:

- What does it mean to be disability led? There is another organization that presents work by artists with disabilities, but their strategy disenfranchises disabled people.
- I see other organizations who are not BIPOC-centered shifting their language. People are co-opting language. We know that data can back up our words, but we have issues with collecting it.
- I don't want demographic data I report to influence an operating support grant decision. If the grant is specifically geared towards my [BIPOC] community that's fine.

Other Topics

Themes described in this section were not discussed during the project briefing to select IAC staff and board members.

Outreach Suggestions

Interviewees were asked to share their thoughts about how IAC could reach out to a broader audience, in particular new prospective operating support applicants. Several interviewees offered up ideas and advice:

- Many interviewees mentioned local, multicounty, statewide and national networks that they participated in. Some of these were arts-specific (e.g., network of art leagues, national arts and health organization) and others were broader in focus but had arts interests (e.g., chambers of commerce, state association of developmental disabilities, district offices of education).
- Offer up concrete, tangible ways to engage with IAC. Put out an offer first, rather than asking us to provide lots of information about our organization.
- Use multiple tactics for communications: emails, videos, flyers, even physical presence at events.
- Continue the effort of reaching out to communities in southern Illinois. Many interviewees in this part of the state expressed gratitude for the increased presence of IAC they have experienced in the past few years.
- Continue supporting the Local Arts Network (an Americans for the Arts forum focusing on local arts agencies). Interviewees that were members of this group greatly appreciated the connection and sense of belonging it provides.

Application Changes

Interviewees offered up suggestions and advice for changing the application content and format. Many of these suggestions were particularly geared toward encouraging new applicants.

- A video, one that is informal (e.g., recorded on a phone) and short but it can still show who we are
- An interview instead of written application
- Final report by email or sharing links
- Don't ask for overly long, invasive responses.
- Have a first phase that is really short and/or informal.
- Don't use a one size fits all approach, not everyone is a good writer.

Capacity Building

In addition to operating support grants, interviewees offered up some suggestions for other support. Note that the constituent survey also included many suggestions for capacity building.

- Offer financial support for grant writers or other fundraising staff.
- Guidance on how to improve physical accessibility while remodeling their space
- Training on how to establish metrics and collect data

Community Arts Access Program

Two interviewees located in rural counties noted that they were aware of the Community Arts Access (regranting) program but did not believe there was a regranting partner available in their area who could serve as a funding resource. These organizations were located in different parts of the state.

Acceptance Paperwork

In general, grantees were comfortable with the acceptance paperwork process. Writing letters to legislators was a component that was surprisingly polarizing. Some greatly appreciated the opportunity to promote that they were an IAC grantee ("I enjoy writing these letters, we can brag about our work"), while others felt that it was a waste of time ("It's not like the governor is waiting to hear from us").

Salesforce

While experienced operating support grantees were generally grateful for the transition to the Salesforce platform, there was some specific functionality that was requested to improve the experience. Examples included:

- Having the ability to save application and final report drafts
- Autofilling information from the previous year
- Having a dynamic system that takes the responses to questions and only shows subsequent questions that are relevant
- System confirmation that an application or final report submission has been successful
- Having the ability to download a copy of the application once it's been submitted