

Illinois Equitable Grant Making Assessment Initiative

Recommendations Report ◀

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

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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 Western Illinois Museum in Macomb hosts a special event for Hispanic Heritage Month, featuring Daniel Rojas (harp master) and Claire Happel Ashe (harp apprentice).

Introduction

As a state government agency, the Illinois Arts Council (IAC) has a public mandate to make the arts equitably accessible for all Illinois residents. The agency's [2021-2026 Strategic Plan](#) reflects this emphasis and echoes Gov. J. B. Pritzker's directive to make equity a top priority across state government in Illinois. IAC's plan identifies "a commitment to access, inclusion, diversity, and equity as a key area for growth and impact" and asserts "equity and access in programming and grant opportunities for all Illinoisans" as a top objective. The plan also directs the agency to "identify and promote policies and procedures that advance inclusion and equity."

To help the arts agency fulfill this objective, IAC and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies embarked on the Equitable Grant Making Assessment Initiative (EGAIN) in 2023. EGAIN was a collaborative effort to examine the agency's grant making through an equity lens, in order to identify funding gaps and recommend strategies that IAC can pursue to reduce barriers to arts support. EGAIN was a mixed-method assessment that includes both quantitative and qualitative components. The aims of the initiative were 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 is the final one in a series and consists of summary recommendations. Previous reports have described and shared findings from individual research components of the project: grants data analysis, constituent survey, constituent interviews and a field scan of other state arts agencies' practices. Complete details of these analyses and findings are in the following reports:

- Illinois Equitable Grant Making Assessment Initiative: Grants Analysis Technical Report
- Illinois Equitable Grant Making Assessment Initiative: Constituent Survey Report
- Illinois Equitable Grant Making Assessment Initiative: Constituent Interview Report
- Illinois Equitable Grant Making Assessment Initiative: State Arts Agency Field Scan

The recommendations presented here are informed by these components and by an understanding of IAC's current operating environment, gained through:

- review of key IAC policies and procedures (including eligibility requirements, guidelines, applications and final reports, funding formulas, etc.),

- interviews with IAC staff and council members, and
- regular group dialogues with staff and members of the council's equity task force.

The EGAIN research concentrates on general operating support grants. This focus on operating support was intentional because of the large portion of IAC dollars devoted to operating support. Operating support dollars are also important in fostering capacity for arts and culture organizations to serve Illinois communities.

Recognizing that there are many nuanced and intersectional aspects to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility efforts, EGAIN focused on four priority populations that are chronically and historically excluded from many arts funding systems:

- **Rurality:** The assessment illuminated rural and urban grant-making patterns. It analyzed information within regions significant to IAC, with a focus on non-metropolitan counties.
- **Economic distress:** EGAIN examined IAC investments in counties and census tracts with the highest rates of poverty.
- **Race and ethnicity:** At the time that this assessment was conducted, the IAC did not collect demographic data on the racial or ethnic characteristics of organizational grantees, so no *statistical* observations about grant awards to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and/or people of color) groups could be offered. However, extensive *qualitative* data was gathered from BIPOC constituents through the EGAIN survey and confidential interviews. The IAC also has included numerous BIPOC constituents in its statewide listening tours, occurring simultaneously with the EGAIN initiative.
- **Disability:** The EGAIN demographic analysis identified regions of the state with the highest proportion of individuals with disabilities, representing an important constituency for IAC to serve.

Survey and interview responses originating from these priority populations were disaggregated and analyzed, in addition to other demographic characteristics such as organizational budget size.

Research focused on IAC's operating support programs for fiscal year 2023, which was the most recent year that a full application was required of all applicants. Drawing on the full array of qualitative and quantitative information produced through EGAIN, this report is intended to be a reference document for IAC as it adjusts its operations and grant programs over time. Note that the agency is currently in the midst of many changes, including some that align with recommendations in this report. The EGAIN research process was one component of a larger process of field consultation and guidelines reviews that are informing shifts in IAC's grant policies and procedures. While EGAIN only examined operating support, research findings and subsequent recommendations will likely inform changes to a broader array of programs and agency operations.

Recommendations are numbered for reference, not to imply a priority order or sequence for implementation.

Recommendations

Agency Policies

1. Secure increased funding.

Closing the equity gaps highlighted by this analysis will place an increased strain on existing resources. Illinois is the 6th most populous state but is currently [ranked 23rd](#) in state per capita funding for the arts. This is reflected in the comparatively small dollar value of IAC grant awards, which were the second-smallest among all states benchmarked in the EGAIN analysis. Expanding the number of constituents IAC serves with its existing budget could cause award amounts to drop even lower or prevent the agency from reaching some areas. Securing additional funds would allow the agency to serve more Illinois communities and better meet its equity goals.

2. Continue to fund operating support.

The continuation of access to operating support funds was considered by constituents to be an essential strategy for supporting underserved and under-resourced communities. In the public funding realm, the National Endowment for the Arts cannot provide operating funds, and most county and municipal arts councils distribute funds in the form of project (rather than operating) support. IAC's operating funds play a distinctive role in developing the creative capacity of the state.

3. Allocate funds across programs in a way that supports equity efforts.

Currently, approximately 60% of IAC's grant dollars are dedicated to its three operating support programs: General Operating Support, Arts Service Organizations, Partners in Excellence. IAC should consider whether the allocation to each of those programs aligns with its equity goals. The agency also may wish to revisit the policy rationale for having separate Arts Service Organizations and Partners in Excellence categories. The EGAIN initiative did not evaluate the impact of these specific programs, so they may be playing an important role in IAC's grant portfolio. However, they are not widely understood by constituents and have narrow eligibility parameters that should be examined through an equity lens.

4. Examine how other grant programs could shift to support equity efforts.

IAC's Community Arts Access program is a decentralized strategy that provides funds and support for local partners to develop grant-making processes that are responsive to their service areas. The agency should consider evaluating this program and aligning it to meet its equity objectives. Likewise, the agency offers grants that are attuned to particular types of activities (residencies, touring, etc.) and also grants that more directly support artists. Consider how these dollars can be strategically deployed and made as accessible and flexible as possible.

5. Consider how IAC could offer support for capacity building and networking.

While IAC is primarily a grant maker, constituent feedback indicated a strong desire for additional services. In particular, providing opportunities for convening and learning were requested; specific examples can be referenced in the Constituent Survey and Constituent Interview reports. Numerous

other state arts agencies provide capacity building, professional development and convening/networking services as a complement to direct funding, often in collaboration with statewide partners.

6. Engage the community in ongoing conversations about equity.

Constituent feedback indicated that there were divergent ideas about what it means for IAC to become a more equitable grant maker. As one example, the majority of all survey respondents (60%) indicated that increasing grant awards for small-budget organizations would make IAC more equitable; a much smaller percentage of Partners in Excellence grantees agreed with this (35%). The Constituent Survey Report provides more examples of how constituents think about equity. Regular dialogue about the issues and sharing of feedback from the state as a whole could foster mutual understanding among grantees and also help the field understand IAC's funding dilemmas and strategies more fully.



Art Encounter's 2022 *Elevate* mural, by artist Sholo, located in Evanston

Agency Operations

7. Continue providing high levels of personalized constituent support.

Constituents valued their interactions with IAC and considered the staff to be highly responsive. This feedback was consistently expressed about staff at all levels of seniority and from multiple departments.

8. Consider how IAC staff roles could optimally support equity efforts.

Currently, program directors are organized primarily by artistic discipline (referred to as "program areas"). The majority of constituents surveyed (61%) work in more than one program area, implying that many might not be ideally served in a single discipline structure. In addition, feedback from

organizations serving priority/underserved populations indicate that many of them are rooted in particular neighborhoods or focused on specific geographies. Developing place based service regions, networks and expertise may better align with how the arts field views its work. It may be worthwhile to consider whether constituents would be better served by organizing IAC program directors by geography rather than discipline.

Operating Support Policies

9. Maintain funding accessibility as a program intention.

IAC's operating support programs provide consistent, long-term funding to many organizations across the state and of all sizes. Organizations do not have to meet a budget minimum and can apply for funds after one year of operation—a laudable level of accessibility compared to many other state arts agencies. IAC awards significantly more operating support grants than its benchmarked peers. IAC should continue this policy of funding arts in communities as broadly as possible; note that an influx of new grantees would necessitate an increase in agency funding.

10. Streamline the application process for everyone.

The constituent survey report details many suggestions for changing the application process to be simpler and more streamlined. These include shifting to a multiyear application cycle, revising the 504 (section of the Americans with Disabilities Act covering entities receiving federal financial assistance) workbook requirement, clarifying guidelines language and updates to Salesforce.

11. Ease administrative burdens for newer, small-budget and all-volunteer organizations.

Some changes to the application process would be particularly beneficial to a subset of the agency's applicants. These are detailed in the Constituent Interview report and include waiving the GATA (Illinois Grant Accountability and Transparency Act) requirements, reducing or eliminating the cash match requirement, and accepting applications in alternative formats. In addition, IAC should consistently and clearly communicate how new and small-budget organizations can receive extra support in their applications. Note that these strategies may disproportionately help BIPOC, low-income and disability-serving organizations.

12. Develop strategies to increase funds going to rural areas.

The most salient finding from the empirical analysis of IAC grants was a disparity between urban and rural areas. More than half of Illinois counties do not receive operating support funds; these counties are concentrated in (but are not exclusive to) the southern part of the state. Only 6% of grants and grant dollars went to rural counties, while 94% of grants and dollars went to urban counties. Closing the rural funding gap would represent a major stride forward in arts equity for Illinois.

13. Develop strategies for defining and engaging other underserved communities.

During the EGAIN initiative, multiple staff, board and field perceptions surfaced about which populations are historically underserved by IAC. Grappling with this will be an ongoing challenge. The

agency will need to determine whether there are key populations—including or beyond the four considered by EGAIN—with which IAC desires to engage more deeply. If so, what information is needed to inform program development? Should all underserved groups be prioritized for funding, or are the needs of some more urgent than others? While the EGAIN initiative provided a useful starting point, it was not broad enough in scope to differentiate the distinct experiences and needs of Native American and Indigenous organizations, those serving the Latino/Hispanic constituents, or Asian, Black or Arab populations. Likewise, this assessment could not shed light on the needs of LGBTQ+ grantees, older adults, veterans or other particular groups. Through ongoing evaluation and field dialogue, the agency should continue to deepen its understanding of the distinct views and circumstances of various underserved groups in order to inform future funding and technical assistance strategies that are appropriately calibrated to their needs.

14. Reexamine the funding formula.

IAC's current formula for calculating grant awards is indexed to grantee budget size, which means that larger organizations receive more dollars. This also means that award sizes get extremely small for applicant organizations with modest budgets. It may be worthwhile to explore and consider alternative formulas, to adjust the current formula to place more emphasis on panel scores, or to incorporate a point system that helps the agency ensure that funding reaches underserved populations. The State Arts Agency Field Scan provides examples of how peers have made changes to their funding formulas. Whatever adjustments IAC pursues, transparency will be important to address constituent confusion about how grant dollars are determined.



Collaborative art project by Freeport artist Melinda Cook, Freeport Art Museum

Communications and Outreach

15. Increase the frequency and clarity of communications.

Constituents expressed a need for clear, consistent and easily accessible information about IAC and its funding programs. This includes a general understanding of IAC, program purposes, eligibility for

different programs, application requirements, deadlines, timeline details and reporting requirements. New, small-budget and all-volunteer organizations are particularly in need of information that is easy to access across multiple platforms (website, email, social media, physical presence, etc.). More details about communications needs can be referenced in the Constituent Survey and Constituent Interview reports. Formalizing communications should allow program staff to spend more time on personalized interactions and making sure that agency information reaches new constituents, who may require extra assistance when first learning about agency funding opportunities.

16. Engage with all constituents on a regular basis.

Constituents expressed a desire for more substantive interactions with IAC. Examples shared included individual meetings with individual staff and continuing the agency listening tours, which received favorable comments. Continuing this type of engagement in an ongoing manner would be well received and would support relationship-building efforts, especially in rural parts of the state.

17. Focus outreach and support on rural, new and small-budget organizations.

The Grants Analysis Technical Report documents geographic gaps in IAC's operating support. Focusing on organizations in rural communities, especially the southern part of the state, could also increase support to people with disabilities and low-income communities, given the distribution of these demographics across Illinois. Focusing on new and small-budget organizations would increase the number of overall grantees as well as the number of grantees serving priority populations.



A drawing class at McLean County Arts Center in Bloomington

Big-Picture Considerations

18. Develop definitions and stay current on language shifts.

There does not appear to be consensus (within IAC or between IAC and its grantees) about the definitions and use of the key terms *BIPOC*, *low-income*, *rural*, *disability*, *demographics*, *diversity* or *equity*. Many individuals and organizations consulted during the EGAIN research process had personal

definitions for the four priority populations, but there was not necessarily agreement about those definitions or how to apply them. Concerns were expressed that the term *equity* has negative connotations to some. Constituent feedback (through both surveys and interviews) indicated that many assumed *demographics* and *equity* referred exclusively to race/ethnicity. Illinois is not alone in this struggle: equity language is hotly debated by grant makers and communities nationwide, and there is no consensus standard at this time given the fluidity of contemporary terminology. This lack of clarity can cause misunderstandings at the constituent level, making it even more important for IAC to communicate clearly about who it is attempting to reach and what its equity work will encompass. Feedback through the survey and interviews included examples of the language that constituents used to describe the priority populations, as well as some insights into how they defined other equity related terms.

19. Increase transparency.

Regular and transparent reporting can inspire confidence in the agency's efforts to advance equity. Constituents expressed a desire to understand more fully who IAC funds, where they are located and the amount of grant awards. Very few constituents understood how their award amount was determined. It was unclear whether constituents understood that the operating support programs provide consistent funding to many organizations across the state and at all budget sizes. Constituents only indirectly made references to the Partners in Excellence program, in the sense that there was some understanding that there were organizations receiving larger grant awards. Providing more information about who receives operating support funding and how those decisions are made would greatly increase the transparency of the agency, would help to align field perceptions with agency reality and could broaden the base of support for the agency's equity goals over time.

20. Set measurable goals for equitable grant making.

Each component of the EGAIN research process revealed that IAC has a strong commitment to reaching more communities and facilitating wider access to funding. However, IAC currently lacks any formal metrics for grant-making equity. What should equitable grant making look like in terms of geographic distribution of dollars, populations reached or practices inculcated among grantees? Answering these questions with specific targets could support prioritization of agency actions, spur discussion about how to accelerate progress, inform decisions about ongoing program improvements and empower more transparent communications. Regularly measuring and reporting on progress would help IAC to quantify what resources (monetary, technical, human) are needed to advance funding equity statewide.

21. Improve data collection.

The current data collection practices in place at IAC are not sufficient to meet the agency's equity goals for guiding its allocations or investments, measuring progress, or accurately communicating the agency's equity work to stakeholders. The Grants Analysis Technical Report identified information gaps and offered suggestions to support a better understanding of how the arts are funded in Illinois. Options include:

- collecting structured information on specific audiences that applicants intend to serve with IAC funds, and/or
- collecting demographic information (on either a required or an optional basis) on the characteristics of applicants for IAC grants, and/or
- analyzing the underlying demographic, economic and geographic characteristics of communities in which IAC grants are awarded or grantee activities are conducted.

Each of these approaches carries distinct challenges in the realms of data validation and reporting burden. Furthermore, some interviewees expressed concern about basing grant decisions on demographic data, an issue that is becoming increasingly complex legally. IAC is encouraged to weigh all these factors carefully and align its efforts with successful and approved data collection practices used by other agencies in the state of Illinois.

22. Sequence changes over time and communicate with the field frequently.

The EGAIN initiative and IAC's listening tours surfaced a large number of new ideas relating to equity and funding access. Altering grant-making policies and practices is a complex undertaking that necessitates weighing multiple options and their likely consequences. The impact of changes may not be immediately apparent and may require time to observe. Care also must be given to providing the field with adequate lead time to understand and prepare for funding shifts. In consideration of all of these factors, it is typical for state arts agencies to phase in grant-making changes over a three- to five-year period, and to use frequent communications to explain changes in advance. It may be helpful for IAC to mirror this norm and build a multiyear action plan to organize its own change efforts. The State Arts Agency Field Scan report provided examples of multiyear efforts that are in process among peers.

23. Evaluate and iterate.

Committing to evaluate the grant-making changes currently being made would allow IAC to reflect on progress, understand whether and how to update goals, revise policies, and continually improve operations over time, as is appropriate for a public agency. Evaluation could take many forms: an update to some of the EGAIN research components (e.g., the grants data analysis, constituent feedback surveys), a continuation of IAC's listening tour or methods used by other state arts agencies (e.g., grantee surveys, focus groups, a staff/board/constituent advisory body).

Conclusion

Advancing funding equity is an important component of the IAC's overall commitment to public service. By initiating the EGAIN analysis and engaging in ongoing stakeholder dialogues, the IAC is equipping itself to guide future funding and remain responsive to constituents. NASAA commends IAC for its desire to learn in service to Illinois communities.