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Characteristics of an Effective Peer Panel

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It's as if you're putting together a dinner party in a [manner in which] you hope will generate a rich conversation.

— Melissa Franklin, director of the Pew Fellowships in the Arts

For the past fourteen years I've been honored to guide groups of artists and other arts professionals annually through the rigorous task of choosing worthy applicants for life-changing fellowships. The hard work and integrity of each of the nearly 250 different panelists who have served on the Bush Foundation's artist fellowship program gave me pause each year — pause to consider the value of collaborative decision making, the inherent truth found in a generous spirit, and the power of a democratic process.

The heart of the peer panel process occurs around the “table” — the deep and thoughtful discussions, careful considerations, healthy and vigorous debate, and the collective process of decision making by one's peers and others who are deeply knowledgeable about the work and the proposals reviewed. It is, as Melissa Franklin notes in the epigraph, the very best kind of dinner party. So as I reflect on my interviews for this article, I imagine my own dinner party in which these seventeen individuals are having a lively conversation about the peer panel selection process. Everyone's experiences are slightly different; participants' opinions on their roles and how the meetings should be run are not necessarily the same. Yet, for the most part, they create a sampling of ideas for cultivating great panel meetings. So I invite you to join me at this imaginary table for a rich, diverse, and scintillating conversation.

First Course: The Art of Assembling a Dynamic Panel

One of my first mentors as a fellowship program director was Penny Dannenberg, former program director of the New York Foundation for the Arts. “The validity of the choices made [of the grant recipients] has everything to do with the people on the panel,” she emphasizes. “How seriously they respect and honor those choices is crucial to the success of the fellowships.” Peers who serve in this role “understand the pressures, realities, and joy of how to make the work. They have had that experience themselves,” Dannenberg says.

A peer panel is composed of individuals with expertise and experience related to the nature of the grant or award and the disciplines being considered. These groups generally range in size from three to twelve and can be made up of individuals who have never met. The process of deciding whom to invite to participate begins by identifying individuals who have not only the appropriate knowledge but also

the characteristics that will effectively contribute to the deliberations. Nearly everyone agrees that having panelists who possess a “generosity of spirit,” open minds, and the capacity to listen will lead to good decisions.

“You want to take care to invite those who are capable of inquiry — people who will come [to the discussions] with an open mind and heart and who can listen to and fairly grapple with their colleagues,” says Irene Borger, director of the Alpert Award in the Arts, a program of the Herb Alpert Foundation that is administered by the California Institute of the Arts. That kind of person is likely to be someone who is “articulate and will partake in the deliberations. A good panelist needs to be a team player — no divas!” adds Amada Cruz, program director for the Los Angeles-based United States Artists. Good panelists also need “to take responsibility to commit to the work — to digest the material — and to use their intellectual rigor to articulate what the applicant is trying to communicate through the work and the application,” says Joseph V. Melillo, a seasoned panelist and panel chair who serves as executive producing director of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. “Panelists need to listen to one another — this is their greatest asset. You need to understand how your opinion fits in with the others — to act responsibly with objectivity.”

Dramaturge Elizabeth Bennett agrees and adds: “You also need to understand the funder's focus so you can adhere to their guidelines. It's about doing your homework — not just reading the application, but being familiar with what the funder seeks.” Bennett, who has served on many panels, is director of program services for the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

In thinking about her service on panels, poet and novelist Jewelle Gomez says that as someone who describes herself as highly opinionated, “I fight the impulse to overadvocate, to keep a full roster of [applications] in mind. I want to hear other people and what they bring [to the discussion] — their perspectives and experience. What do I need to know that *they* know?”

To expand on these thoughts, Bruce W. Pepich, executive director and curator of collections of the Racine Art Museum in Wisconsin, adds, “I need to know the difference between ‘this is good’ versus ‘I like this.’ It can't be totally about your eye and what pleases you. [You need to pay attention] to the work that is advancing the field and to the dialogue the field is undertaking.”

But biases do exist. We're all human beings. As Louis Masliah, another experienced panelist and founder and executive director of Philadelphia's Scribe Video Center, says, “You need to be clear about your interests in aesthetics, communities, audiences, and so on — to put it on the table and be up front. That way you can have a more ethical process. That's something that can happen through facilitation, or through the social time that occurs before a meeting.

But it's really important to understand where people are coming from."

When the group is being assembled, other considerations will come into play. Do these individuals have a strong vision of their work? Is their work respected by their peers and in their own communities? Are they familiar with a broad range of work, either within their own discipline or across disciplines? Diversity within the group is also taken into account. "Diversity can mean a lot more than age, race, gender, and geography," says Jon P. Peede, literature director at the National Endowment for the Arts. "Thought needs to go into aesthetic diversity," he adds. "I want to know the range of work in which a [potential panelist] is interested." "You want a diversity of different cultural points of view," adds Pew's Melissa Franklin.

Diversity also might show up in the mix of professional roles. Some programs include only working artists and others have a policy not to include critics. Among the program directors I interviewed, most include on their panels a combination of working artists, curators, presenters, critics, editors, educators, and other arts professionals. Some directors look specifically at those who are also teachers. Teachers, they say, have a tendency to see a lot of work, critique work on a regular basis, are usually articulate and clear in their review, and are often individuals who nurture other artists.

Program directors carry out a great deal of research on potential panelists usually as a matter of course throughout the year; most will check at least three "references" for each prospect. This attention to detail lends both credibility and integrity to the decisions, which in turn gives the applicant confidence in the process. "If as an applicant you know you're being scrutinized by this kind of person, then you are more willing to trust the process," says Borger.

Second Course: Guiding the Panel Process

While the panel ultimately holds the responsibility to make either the recommendations or the final decision on grants and fellowships, the planning and facilitation of the meeting are often the purview of a program's staff, typically its director. Providing clarity about the process and intentions of the grants, excellent organizational and time management skills, a sense of fairness as it relates to the review of all applicants, and knowledge of the artistic community and applications were consistently mentioned as the best characteristics of staff managers and facilitators.

Equally important is a spirit of appreciation and hospitality. The program staff "should be really good hosts," says Gomez. "They need to understand interpersonal dynamics. [The panel meeting] is a short but intense experience. To enhance the interpersonal connections is important. Once you have [a meal] together, things will shift. People learn about each other. They develop an interest in each other and become more at ease."

This need for exquisite hospitality does not escape program directors. "We want to treat people like they're our guests. We know how hard they work and we want to appreciate that," says Cruz. "We want to be sure the panelists are well cared for so they have the energy, focus, and ease to do their best work," adds Borger. For many, the dinner the night before the meeting is an opportunity for the panelists to get to know one another and a chance for the facilitator to get a sense of how the deliberations might unfold. Peede adds, "We want to create a tone of goodwill. I also want to show respect for the panelists, and to show the historical significance of what this fellowship means — the important work that has come out of this process. We'll begin by asking those panelists who have received NEA fellowships to talk about [their] value. We want to create an environment where they are quite welcome and of equal importance, where the expectations are high."

As a facilitator, it is also important to be familiar with the material — to have read it yourself. A good facilitator, according to Massiah, "has done [his or her] homework. It's about being aware of the proposal and the guidelines, about noting something in the materials the panel may have missed."

Massiah goes on to say that the facilitator "really has to force the panel to be fair. Expediency can make the process less fair than it should be. As panelists we know all the sweat and effort that go [into the work and into pulling together the application]. Someone needs to remind the assembled group of that.

"The facilitator does put his or her thumb on the scale whether or not they like to admit it," says Massiah. How one communicates information, the choice of panelists, or even how one thinks about diversity are ways in which the facilitator influences the process.

At the same time the facilitators I spoke with were quick to say that their job is to oversee the process and to refrain from the discussions. "I hold space," says Mary Ellen Childs, composer, experienced panelist, and program director of the McKnight Artist Fellowships for Choreographers and Dancers in Minnesota. "I maintain the criteria and guidelines and goals for the program. And sometimes I will tweak the process to help manage it."

"You need to know when to insert yourself into the process without editorializing," says Peede. "Sometimes it's just about changing the energy in the room. It's also important to have the panelists clarify what they're saying. For example, if a panelist says, 'I don't like first-person narratives,' I don't let that go. That's an aesthetic choice — so that's a time when to editorialize as a facilitator."

"The hardest thing about moderating is when to point to information that is in the application or not in the application. Knowing when to talk and when not to. Knowing

when to ask questions that are leading or not. [For the facilitator,] it's hard to draw the line," observes Bennett.

Sometimes problems can emerge in the meetings. A panelist may be consistently negative, another may not contribute to the dialogue, or emotions might take over. "You don't want someone who is very quiet to get overrun by a stronger personality. Or, sometimes there are ethnic tensions," says Gomez, that create an undercurrent to the conversations. "It's important for staff to be aware of these situations and to interrupt [them] — to ask questions or find a comment to make."

"If you're paying attention carefully," Borger advises, "you can often see things as they begin to arise. In those situations, you ask yourself, 'What is true and useful?' It's not one or the other. How can you balance both firmness and kindness? How can you approach the process with a kind of generosity?"

Another method to meeting facilitation is to use a panel chair, a voting member of the panel who leads the deliberations. Both United States Artists and the Pew Fellowships for the Arts use this approach. Cruz describes a good chair as someone who is a diplomat, a leader in the field who is deferential to others. He or she will have the capacity to see the big picture and consider multiple points of view. It's often someone who serves this role in his or her professional life, adds Franklin. Karen Moss, a Los Angeles-based art historian and curator who has served as a panel chair and has experienced others in this role, appreciates this approach to running a meeting: "Even when you're the chair, there is guidance from the staff. But in the end I do feel I have authority to run the process. I don't feel there's the same level of trust in the process when staff is running the meeting." Moss has experienced times when staff can overstep, though that is not always the case, she emphasizes.

Every program is different — from the goals of the grants to the size of the applicant pool. How one manages the process will, of course, vary as well. Techniques for reaching decisions can range from voting or ranking to consensus building or some combination. For some, there may be more interaction between panel and facilitator. For others, less.

Time is also an important factor — time to allow for decisions to unfold. In my own meetings I talked about the importance of stirring the stew. If the artwork is the main ingredient, all the other materials are the components that make the stew tasty. You have to stir it all up to get as full an understanding of the artist as possible. And then you have to let it simmer. Borger talks about the value of "delaying closure on a problem. In my experience, this is the key. In theories on creativity, an important capacity is to work with a problem and wait. In other words, to digest the material. To listen to one's fellow panelists. To think together. To reflect. To be interested in what each other has to say. To be fluid rather than fixed. In Buddhism one finds the idea of approaching things with what's called Beginner's Mind. You

are willing to wait in the 'unknown' for a long time, without rushing and without judging prematurely." It's about having an attitude of openness, to investigate and allow the process to unfold. "If you lay out the process and principles, then you can let [the panel] do [its] work. And [as a facilitator], be as awake as you can," reflects Borger, who says that after having presented the key questions, she tends to be quiet and serve as a "container and a witness."

Final Course: From Good to Great — the Panel Journey

"Good panels are exceptional. I tend to look upon them as journeys. You are out of sight of land, away from friends, quarantined from normal routines, and bunched together with a group of strangers in a confined space. At the end, you experience an overwhelming sense of having traveled a long way through different dimensions" (Sally Sommer, dance historian and critic, writing in a commissioned piece about her experience on a panel for the Pew Fellowships in the Arts).

While the individuals assembled at the panel table may meet all the criteria for excellence and the facilitator may be a master at steering a meeting, there are no assurances that the process will be an exceptional experience. Carefully "curating" a panel and strong facilitation will certainly increase the instances of those great experiences, but they are no guarantee.

Panels that accomplish their task in a professional manner have several things in common: they do their homework, the group is collegial, and panelists respect each other's opinions. The facilitator is clear about the process and goals of the program and creates an atmosphere of fairness for the applicants and appreciation for the work being carried out. Good, and even great, decisions have been made; a good day's work has been done. Most panels are likely to follow this path.

But, the great panels, the ones that leave everyone in the room invigorated, occur when everyone "has brought the intellectual capacity to be profoundly moved. There's a kind of love and passion for the work. There's a kind of vibrancy that goes on, when the work is transformative," according to Borger. "I learn so much," Bennett says of her best experiences. "The level of discussion is high. There's a good mix of people who can be stubborn, but who also understand the need for give-and-take. [There's] time for substantial discussion for each artist." In these situations the discussions are "elevated to a broader context, even though you're making individual decisions. And you forget that time is passing," Childs adds.

Peede feels that "a great panel finds three or four works of art that can be easily overlooked and says, 'Let's invest in this.' They see greatness in the flood of work — greatness that can be overlooked when panels get distracted."

Most panel experiences, especially the ones ranging from good to great, can reverberate into the field and through an individual's own work in unexpected ways. The investments in time and resources for this process have the potential to feed and seed a larger conversation, new work and friendships, enriching the field as a whole. "Panels often host some of the most eloquent and responsible discussions about the arts which are available anywhere," says poet and Stanford University English professor Eavan Boland. The discussions and the opportunity to see a lot of work in a short period of time can inspire panelists and help them see their own work in new ways. Often new connections are made and artistic collaborations occasionally emerge. It's a chance to "be able to see a lot of new work and hear the opinions of colleagues. For me it's a chance to stay current. It helps to see work that is happening elsewhere — to get outside your own bubble," says Moss.

Opportunities also can emerge for applicants. Composer Childs reports that as an applicant, "At least once, if not twice, I've had things happen — commissions and opportunities to perform — because of the panel process, even though I didn't get the grant. It's a chance to be known." For some applicants, applying for a grant can help them articulate an answer to a question they haven't considered, to have the opportunity to really think through their work and articulate their ideas. "Numerous artists have described how helpful this has been. And you think, 'Great,' " says Borger.

The total value of these grants and fellowships is measured by significantly more than the actual dollars awarded. The sense of fairness and integrity of the process, the opportunities that arise by having one's work seen, the growth in self-confidence that emerges in the individual as a result of having received an award through this process, and the ongoing stimulation of the field through discussion and learning all contribute to the total worth of the grants. Further, "It is important to the artists to sense that there is a democratic process operating that will attend to their needs," says the Brooklyn Arts Council's folk arts director, Kay Turner, who is herself a performer, musician, and writer. "What they care about is knowing there are people in a room taking their work seriously."

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based in Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

Author's note: Research for this article is based on a series of interviews with a nearly equal number of directors of artist fellowship programs and panelists, both artists and curators. Those who have served as panelists have had extensive experience in this role for public agencies and private foundations. For the purposes of this article, I focused on fellowship and grantmaking programs for individuals, but the lessons learned and the wisdom shared could apply to any kind of peer panel process. While I was not able to include comments from everyone interviewed, the collective experiences and wisdom of all those interviewed contributed to this article. Many thanks

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