

## *CultureWork* Essay

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### **Following the Threads**

In 2005, CultureWork published “From Termination to Triumph: Reflecting on the First Ten Years of the University of Oregon Arts and Administration Program.” I’m happy to report that the UO Arts and Administration Program has experienced continued success evidenced by the graduation of over 325 cultural sector leaders; the expansion of program concentrations, minors, course offerings, and placement opportunities; and a continued commitment to global partners who support community arts and cultural services.

Convenient for the purposes of this essay, the last section of the article listed ten practical recommendations from UO faculty AAD program founders for future arts and culture workers. Now over a decade later, I have chosen to comment on three of these recommendations, and identify why they are particularly significant for those who work in the cultural sector in their communities.

1. **Know and document your goals and strengths.** “There is a thread you follow” is the first line of William Stafford’s popular poem *The Way it Is*.\* Beyond a clear mission statement and shared *vitae*, there are tenets that are basic to any organization. For example, integral to the UO Arts Administration Program has been the “thread” that arts education and arts management extend far beyond classroom experience. (Who could have predicted 20 years ago the emerging healthcare concentration?) Finding, sharing, and discussing connecting threads builds cohesion, establishes identity, and makes opportunities visible.

There may be strengths you haven’t considered. Are there traditions of your organization you might enrich and capitalize on? Are there nooks and crannies of your venue you might share, remodel, or designate for special activities? (For example, have you taken advantage of fads like “yoga in the gallery”?) Are there idle programs that could be reshaped to establish a new direction or attract a new audience? What’s already in place is often easier to adapt than starting something new.

2. **Develop a diverse team of professionals.** Significant more than ever, diversity provides balance, prevents duplication, protects your group from vulnerabilities, and exposes the organization to new constituents. Champion the diverse interests and expertise of group members. Encourage connections to other organizations, cross-border projects, and timely events. Identify and invest in community partners. Broaden your network locally, by region, nationally, and internationally.
3. **Be flexible.** To be flexible you must also be aware of current events and concerns that affect cultural policy. “Didn’t see that one comin!” is not the response you want to a problem. Though funding loss often tops vulnerabilities in an organization, issues related to ethical concerns can cause havoc with public perception and staff morale. For example, if you self-identify as a supporter in a sanctuary city, what does that mean for your organization? What part will you play? Safety concerns have, more than ever, come to the forefront. For example, every organization should be aware and be using best practices related to disaster preparedness. Could your building sustain an earthquake? Are critical data for your organization cloud-copied? How might your organization contribute not only in the aftermath of a disaster, but participate in preparedness? Practice scenarios—not just by establishing written policies, but by physically enacting drills. Embodiment is important to be a “change-ready” organization.

In musing over the initial faculty recommendations, I am struck by how much more complicated the world seems to be today and how much broader the scope of mandates cultural organizations have adopted. Also of note is how dependent and overlapping each recommended point is with the next, but I’m reassured that I can still follow the threads. Consider the threads in your own organization, can you follow them?

Stafford, William. (1998). **The Way It Is**. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press.

Link: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/319729-the-way-it-is-there-s-a-thread-you-follow-it>