

AFS Consultancy and Professional Development Program Report
Initial Focus Groups for a Maryland State Folklife Center Feasibility Study
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In the summer of 2016, Goucher College responded to an RFP from the National Council for Traditional Arts (operating on behalf of the Maryland State Arts Council) to conduct a feasibility study for the creation of a Maryland Folklife Center. As one of the oldest public folklore programs in the country, Maryland has a strong tradition of supporting folk arts including a robust apprenticeship grant program, an annual folklife festival and awards ceremony, an archival partnership with the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and a network of folk arts partners that comprise a statewide infrastructure for folk artists. The idea for a statewide Folklife Center began a few years ago with a series of visioning meetings that engaged the folk arts community in conversations about the value of such a center. Its creation must be undertaken with open awareness and consideration of the existing infrastructure so as not to be perceived as competitive or redundant.

We in the Welch Center for Graduate Studies at Goucher Collage saw this as an opportunity to collaborate as a faculty across two Masters Programs (Cultural Sustainability and Management) and to incorporate our alumni and students in a real-life consulting project. Several of our faculty members have longstanding relationships with the Maryland State Folklife Program and so they bring a sincere commitment to its success. Our proposal strategy reflected the mission of the MA in Cultural Sustainability (MACS) program at Goucher College. This program has been in existence for seven years and is based just north of Baltimore (<http://www.goucher.edu/graduate-programs/ma-in-cultural-sustainability>). The program offers an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how culture and artistic traditions make meaning in our

lives. Combining practical skills with theoretical grounding, our students seek sustainable strategies for cultural equity in the communities where they work, live and otherwise find meaning. Ethics, cultural sensitivity, community cultural self-determination and voice are the hallmarks of the MACS program. Through courses such as Cultural Partnerships, Cultural Policy, Ethnography, Fundraising, Strategic Planning and Organizing Communities, the program identifies real-world experiences for students and faculty to explore together while providing opportunities to serve the public. It is this philosophy and unique experience that we brought to the Maryland Folklife Center feasibility study. We were pleased to be awarded the contract and work began in mid-April.

What made our proposal stand out is that our approach to the feasibility study mirrors an ethnographic methodology. We entered into the study recognizing our own preconceived ideas, but placing them on hold while we listen to the multiple voices of communities throughout Maryland. We understand that many stakeholders in a folklife program do not respond to the standard forms of communication (i.e. press releases, email, and social media). Therefore, we have proposed a combination of paper and online surveys, focus group meetings, site visits, as well as in-person and phone interviews to ensure the broadest range of voices are included.

As stated in the RFP, the goals of this feasibility study are:

1. To provide recommendations for three possible ways forward in creating a Maryland Folklife Center, and
2. To provide a weighted analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these options, including an assessment and outline of the costs for each.

The Goucher team plans to advance these goals by gathering relevant data from as

diverse a group of stakeholders as possible, using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods with particular attention paid to the strengths of the existing folklife infrastructure. Our focus group strategy, developed by the Center for Applied Research (www.cfar.com), serves to “convert planning from a retrospective orientation (the removal of deficiencies of the past) toward a prospective orientation (the design of what is desired in the future).” It is grounded in a cultural approach which honors multiple ways of knowing and being. Participants are encouraged to imagine the folklife center several years into the future and to explore what it is doing well. Some participants take on the persona of staff/stakeholders while others become journalists or folklorists conducting interviews with the staff/stakeholders to tease out what has made the (imagined) Maryland Folklife Center successful. This strategy frees up the participants to think beyond their current expectations. Once they put themselves into the future, they can begin to imagine broader options related to Development/Funding, Collaborations/Partnerships, Governance, Activities and the Physical Plant or Structure. Our plan as the consulting team is to hold 9 focus group meetings, strategically hosted around the state, followed by a 10th meeting that will bring together members of each of the nine previous meetings. During the 10th meeting, participants will listen to the many ideas generated by the previous meetings, review our preliminary recommendations and provide critical suggestions to help refine the final three models. Each of these focus group meetings is comprised of between 10 and 20 carefully selected participants to ensure a broad representation of stakeholders. We have also decided to add one final large community forum in a central location as a way to publically launch the three potential models and crowd source more details before making a final presentation to the Maryland State Arts Council and Steering Committee.

Our team is composed of nine consultants. The Leadership Team is facilitating the feasibility study from start to finish, including research on funding strategies. Two

team members work specifically with our 3-5 student participants while the Ethics and Data Analysis Team will assess the findings and prepare a comprehensive report with evidence-based recommendations. The data we are gathering will be analyzed with a specific eye toward ethical and sustainable practices. In our planning for the Center, we expect to be guided by the interests of multiple stakeholders and to adapt successful programming and revenue models from non-profit folklife organizations in other states.

An exciting component of the project is the inclusion of graduate students in the process. Students enroll in a 1.5 credit practicum and earn required management or elective credits for participation. To date our students have conducted online research to identify relevant and innovative models and to design a matrix of sustainability characteristics for such organizations. They have also conducted funding research, drafted surveys and interview protocols and translated them into Spanish for distribution to the Latin@ community. And they have had their work scrutinized, reviewed, edited and enhanced by the entire team – just as they would if they were participating on any consulting team. The students who are currently involved (one or two students in each semester since the spring) are finalizing the interview protocol, reaching out to suggested people to interview and conducting in person and phone interviews with stakeholders in Maryland, including the Latin@ community, as well as with model organizations outside Maryland.

With that as background, Goucher College sought AFS consultancy funds to support the first two focus group meetings in the series; facilitator stipends, transportation and lodging, and a training session for “staff” who will be supporting the remaining 8 focus group meetings. AFS funds helped us to refine the focus group process as a model for gathering data and ensuring the best results in our subsequent gatherings.

Due to external circumstances, we were not able to begin the feasibility study until mid-May, making it difficult to conduct the AFS work before the end of May. However, we

were able to hold our two anticipated focus group meetings the first weekend in June and cleared these dates with staff at AFS before proceeding. Thus, we are pleased to report that the Cultural Sustainability Research and Consultancy Team at Goucher College completed the following activities in accordance with the AFS Consultancy and Professional Development Program contract:

5/23/17 – A web-based training led by focus group facilitator Barry Dornfeld was provided for members of the Goucher Team who will be facilitating and/or supporting the community forums. Dr. Dornfeld led participants through the Idealized Design model he will be using to encourage creative and forward-thinking suggestions from community stakeholders. We discussed roles for each of the participants, created a slide deck to guide the focus groups and assigned presenters for each section of the presentation. We also discussed a format for note-taking despite the fact that we plan to record each of the focus group meetings. We are striving for consistency in the note-taking to better enable coding, analysis, and reporting. This training was approximately 2.5 hours and was recorded for future use. It was attended by 3 professional team members and 2 graduate student researchers.

6/2/17 -- The first community forum of the feasibility study was hosted in the afternoon at the Maryland State Arts Council (MSAC) in Baltimore, MD. Participants included the 12-member project Steering Committee composed of MSAC council members, prior Maryland Traditions directors, and professionals active in the field. It was facilitated by Barry Dornfeld and supported by team members Robert Forloney, Shannon Smith, Rory Turner, and student researcher Frances Ramos-Fontan. Conducting the first focus group conversation with the Steering Committee allowed us to create a baseline for the design of our three potential scenarios. These are some of the key minds behind the desire for a statewide folklife center so it was useful to start with what they already

imagine. After the formal part of the forum, we were also able to brainstorm with them about additional sites and stakeholders to include in subsequent forums.

Some key ideas and learning moments that emerged from this first meeting include:

~ This group struggled with speaking in the future tense and thinking forward; they were stuck in present details with a great deal of conversation revolving around “what is” instead of “what could be.” We will work on this if it continues to happen. But this group is so involved already, that it isn’t surprising they want to focus on enhancing what they know.

~ There was a focus on archives and the partnership with University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). They didn’t suggest the center be contained within an academic setting, but that it should work in partnership and play to the strengths of each partner. In the case of UMBC, they already host the Maryland Traditions archive.

~ Regarding activities, there was a strong emphasis on education, especially K12, and on serving as a portal to folk arts around the state.

~ There was also a clear bias toward a physical space, perhaps even a museum.

6/3/17 -- The second community forum of the feasibility study was hosted in the morning at Creative Alliance in Baltimore, MD. While not a folklife center, Creative Alliance is one of the most supportive organizations in the state actively engaging with folk arts. In fact, they have played host to the Maryland Folklife Festival for several years and also hosted some of the early community visioning conversations about a statewide folklife center. Our forum coincided with a day-long workshop they were holding for Latino artists. Participants in this forum were comprised of 9 area artists, researchers, and organizational practitioners of diverse backgrounds. It was facilitated by Barry Dornfeld and supported by team members Robert Forloney, Shannon Smith,

and student researcher Frances Ramos-Fontan. It was also attended by Maryland Traditions Director, Chad Buterbaugh and co-founding folklorist Elaine Eff.

The session at Creative Alliance was quite different from the session with the Steering Committee and suggests the range of ideas we can expect to be generated by the remaining focus groups. Some key ideas that came up include:

- ~ Fieldwork and outreach as a function of the center, as well as opportunities for research residencies.
- ~ A structure that supports satellite centers reaching into every county in the state; an interest in being a virtual organization that uses social media and technology.
- ~ A sense that the center should be a multi-media organization with significant programming for youth.
- ~ While there was some mention of archives, this group was more interested in outreach to disenfranchised communities, social justice, and providing an equal voice across the state.
- ~ With regard to governance, it was suggested that Maryland Traditions (the current structural support for folk arts in the state) provide oversight and management for the center.

Recordings from these two sessions (with signed releases from all participants) have been uploaded to a shared drive where team members can access them and student participants can begin the process of coding them for key ideas. Eventually our recorded focus group sessions and interviews will become part of the larger Maryland folklife archive.

These two initial sessions successfully set the stage for implementing the remaining 8 state-wide forums included in the feasibility study. The contrast between the

demographics of the two participant groups provided insight into how the community views such a project as opposed to how project leaders approach issues of location, funding, and mission. The responses will help us refine the process to ensure creative thinking and an equal voice for all participants. Two more sessions are scheduled for the first weekend in July and will be located on the Eastern Shore of Maryland; two are scheduled for each of the first and last weekends in August, and the remaining two sessions will be scheduled for September. Sites include The Ward Museum and Sumner Hall G.A.R. on the Eastern Shore, The Prince Georges County African American Museum and Cultural Center, the Sandy Spring Museum in Annapolis, Frostburg State University in the western mountains, and Historic St Mary's.

We have strived to remain open to all design and format possibilities for a statewide folklife center and the diverse perspectives we have already heard reinforce the importance of that. The forum design received enthusiastic feedback from both participants and organizational leaders of the feasibility study. The Goucher Team and the Steering Committee for the Maryland State Folklife Center Feasibility Study looks forward to continuing this project and believes that the generous support of the AFS consultancy funds have given us the opportunity to fine-tune our work to ensure success moving forward.