

The Reestablishment of an Arkansas State Folk Arts Program: An Assessment of Resources with Recommendations

**Elaine Thatcher
December 2016**

This assessment and report were made possible by a grant to Arkansas State University from the American Folklore Society's Consultancy and Professional Development Program through the National Endowment for the Arts.

Note: Throughout this report, I use the terms folklore, folklife, folk arts, traditional culture, and traditional arts somewhat interchangeably. Various public agencies have their preferred terms and emphases, as in the National Endowment for the Arts' preference for an "artistic" approach, thus their preference for "folk and traditional arts." For the new Arkansas state program that is yet to be named, I recommend using the most inclusive term(s) possible. There are examples across the country. I would suggest something along the lines of "the Arkansas Folklife Program" or "the Arkansas Folklife and Traditional Culture Program."

Executive Summary

With the end of Arkansas State University's support for a statewide folklife program in 2014, folklorist Elaine Thatcher was hired to do a resource assessment in Arkansas with an eye to determining the feasibility of establishing a new program with a new host institution. Thatcher spent a week traveling the state, talking to potential stakeholders and supporters.

There is every likelihood that the University of Arkansas Library (located in Fayetteville) will host a new statewide folk arts/life program and that funding will be adequate to establish the program for the foreseeable future. Strong support for a new program—somewhere—was expressed by all to whom Thatcher talked, though no organization other than the University of Arkansas expressed a willingness and an ability to host such a program.

This report recommends next steps and that they be undertaken as soon as possible. Steps include (1) the University of Arkansas Library (UAL) immediately beginning the process of writing a position description and identifying the support services the folklorist position would need; (2) the University making a formal statement or hosting a meeting in which the University of Arkansas Library declares its intentions and gets input from key stakeholders, i.e., the state arts council, the state humanities council, and others to be identified; (3) the UAL submitting a funding request to the National Endowment for the Arts on the next available deadline.

This report also addresses opportunities and challenges facing the new program and makes suggestions for its success.

Background

Folklorists have been doing public folklore work in Arkansas for many years. The institutional history has folklorists at least as far back as 1976 working in institutions such as the Ozark Folk Center, the Arkansas Arts Council, the Texarkana Regional Arts and Humanities Council, Arkansas Historic Preservation, and most recently, Arkansas State University. The folklore office and resource center managed by folklorist W.K. McNeil at the Ozark Folk Center from 1976 to 2005 was especially notable for its consistent and high-quality folk arts programming, and his work established an attentiveness to accuracy and detail that continues at the Center today. The others came and went with funding and institutional interest. Some only had regional, rather than statewide, mandates.

Arkansas State University sponsored a statewide program with Dr. Mike Luster as the folklorist, beginning in about 2005. Funding and institutional support for this program dried up in 2014.

Yet there remains a strong desire on the part of many Arkansas cultural leaders to see a statewide folk arts program be reestablished. I spoke with many of these leaders and traveled a good portion of the state over the course of my consultancy, and support for the idea of a new program was universal. Not all of the institutions were in a position to host a program, but all voiced support if a home could be found.

The good news is that the University of Arkansas Library is interested and has funding to support a new state folklife program.

First and Foremost, Building for Sustainability

Over my decades working in the field I have seen folk arts programs come and go—some of them my own programs. Institutional will and funding rise and fall, and this fact should be understood from the outset, and the new program should be built to be as stable as possible.

Factors affecting stability include:

- Available cash
- Available support services (office space, phone/technology, support staff, etc.)
- How well the program's personnel build bridges and partnerships with other institutions and individuals in the state
- Whether the program is seen as benefitting its target public, and
- Whether the program is seen as benefitting its host institution, helping it to fulfill its mission. This may indeed be the most important factor, because an institution that sees value in a program will find ways to sustain it.

Let me expand on these a bit.

1. Available cash

There are two main areas where funds are needed in a folk arts program: Operational expenses and program expenses. Operational expenses include salaries, rent, utilities, supplies, technology, etc. If a program has enough funds for these costs, then at least they can keep the

doors open, but they would not be able to do much to advance the cause of folk arts in the state.

Program expenses are those funds that go into a variety of areas aimed at documentation, presentation, and support of a state's folk arts and folk artists. There are travel and other costs associated with getting around the state to do field research or to provide services. Cameras, recorders, and other equipment need to be purchased and maintained. Additionally, funds might be needed to catalog and archive the results of the fieldwork. Grantmaking-- apprenticeships, project grants, travel grants, and more may be part of program funds. Also included here are the costs associated with workshops, lectures, exhibits, festivals, publications, and more.

Sources of cash. Expendable funds can come from virtually any source: the host institution, individual and institutional donors, public and private grants, earned income (ticket sales, workshop and conference registrations, product sales, etc.).

Host cash. It is extremely difficult to sustain a folk arts program without the host institution contributing funds to the endeavor. The amount of this support can vary. While grants from the Folk & Traditional Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts can be used to help start up a program, the Endowment generally expects the host institution to increase its share of support over three to four years until the program is fully funded without NEA money. After that, the Endowment welcomes applications for a variety of projects needing funds above and beyond the basic costs of keeping the doors open.

Based on my conversations with University of Arkansas Libraries officials, it appears that they are prepared to provide at least some of the funds for a salary and travel for a folklorist, and possibly also for some support staff.

Recommendation: The UAL should begin the process to identify in-house resources for a folklorist position and office.

Public and private grants. The most reliable source of public funds for folk arts programs is the Folk & Traditional Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts, but it is not a sure thing. As with any proposal, grant applications must be well reasoned and well written, and they must fit within the defined interests of the grantor and explain how they do so. At present, it is uncommon for folk arts projects to receive more than about \$20-25,000 per year from NEA, although the Endowment entertains proposals for as much as \$150,000. Please refer to <https://www.arts.gov/grants/apply-grant/grants-organizations> for the current granting guidelines, as the rules and amounts change over time. Also, conversations with Folk & Traditional Arts Program officers should be held.

State arts agencies are another commonly-sought source of funding for folk arts projects. In Arkansas, since the Arkansas Arts Council does not expect to have an on-staff folk arts coordinator, the conditions are favorable for a long-term partnership between the UAL and the

arts council. At the time of my visit to Arkansas, the arts council was without a director (they were in the midst of a search). I spoke with assistant director Marian Boyd and artist services coordinator Robin McClea, both longtime employees. Since there was no director on board at that time, they could not make any commitments as to how the arts council might participate. However, they indicated great interest in being part of any new initiative in folk arts. They recommended that once a new home for the folk arts program is identified, representatives of that program should seek a meeting with Stacy Hurst, the director of Arkansas Heritage, which is the umbrella agency over the Arkansas Arts Council, as well as Arkansas Historic Preservation, Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, the state archives, the Delta Cultural Center, the Historic Arkansas Museum, the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, and the Old Statehouse Museum. The museums in this system could be excellent partners with the folk arts program in creating exhibits on folk arts topics.

Recommendation: The University of Arkansas Libraries should apply for a National Endowment for the Arts grant as soon as possible. The next deadline is July 4. Funding is available starting June 1, 2018.

Recommendation: UAL should create an Arkansas Folklife Advisory Committee to help with tasks associated with establishing a new program. This committee should consist of UAL representatives as well as representatives from stakeholder organizations around the state. It should reflect a statewide focus. Meetings may be held using Skype or other technology to ensure that everyone has a voice.

Recommendation: UAL, the advisory committee, and other supporters should work with Arkansas Heritage and/or the Arkansas Arts Council to see if a line item of support for the state folk arts program can be established, rather than the folk arts program having to seek a new grant each year. I believe a case could be made for how such an expenditure could provide valuable services and benefits to those agencies. For instance, the folklorist at the state folk arts program can assist in the arts council's granting processes and perhaps work with the council to create folk arts-specific grants, including an apprenticeship program. There are precedents in other states for this partnership (as opposed to grantee) idea. Oregon, California, and Alabama, among others, all have variations of this kind of relationship. If a line item is impossible, then the folklife program should plan on submitting operating support or program grant applications to the arts council yearly.

Individual and institutional donors. Given that changes can happen in institutional support and government grants, I recommend that the new program consider some way of engaging potential donors in the work of documenting and supporting folk arts in Arkansas. This means thinking about the public face of the program and what value the public may see in it: workshops, classes, personal growth, protection of local heritage, all are items that may be valued by potential donors.

Recommendation: UAL should begin immediately to make a fundraising plan.

However, since the program will be housed at a university, it is likely that the university development office will set the rules for seeking and approaching donors. Supporters of the program may want to consider forming a “friends” 501(c)(3) group that could legally accept donations and then make the funds available to the folk arts program for specified purposes.

2. Available Support Services

The folk arts program will need office space, computers, phones, and copiers, among other things. If the University can provide such support, the cash value of these items can be used as cash match on an NEA grant application.

In addition, the program will need occasional services from such professionals as IT support, transcribers, and possibly administrative (office) support. These costs should also be factored into the cost of the program and can also be used as match for some grants.

Recommendation: Build support services and in-kind contributions into the program budget from day one.

3. How well the program’s personnel build bridges and partnerships with other institutions and individuals in the state

This is a crucial piece of the puzzle. Not only must a state folklorist have the necessary qualifications (at least a master’s degree in folklore, ethnomusicology, or a related subject plus practical experience), but they must also be diplomats, actively working at all times to build relationships with individuals and institutions throughout the state.

There are several benefits to this kind of bridge-building. A state program needs helpful contacts in order to get anything substantive done. This means creating relationships of mutual trust with museums, cultural centers, academic departments, state agencies, and more. Some organizations or individuals may worry about a state folklife program stepping on what they view as their territory (intellectual or physical). Political issues are omnipresent. A program that demonstrates benefit for everyone in the state is a program that will have a better chance of long-term success and survival.

The task of diplomacy and advocacy should not fall only on the folklorist, but should also be in the skillset of at least some members of the folk arts advisory committee.

Recommendation: When writing the job description for the folklorist, UAL should write bridge-building/collaborative skills with outside organizations into it.

Recommendation: When assembling a folklife program advisory committee, some individuals with connections to a variety of stakeholders should be included.

4. Whether the program is seen as benefitting its target public

Planners of the new program need to think about how a folk arts program would benefit the people of Arkansas. This is where the above-mentioned advisory group could be helpful in

brainstorming. What are the benefits of such a program, not only from the point of view of cultural agencies and the UAL, but also from the point of view of members of the public? Public support of a program can make a difference in its survival when administrative decisions might threaten it.

Benefits might include:

- Preservation of Arkansas cultures and history (note the “s” on the word “cultures”).
- Education about various communities within Arkansas (the program might even help develop curricula for schools, but public education also occurs through exhibits, festivals, websites, books, and more).
- Identification of traditional artists within the state.
- Documentation of traditional artists.
- Possible promotion of traditional arts resources that would be valuable to tourists and locals. Tourism can bring dollars into communities.
- Grants that put funding into the hands of traditional artists and their communities, helping them continue their cultural traditions.

An early task of the folklife advisory group should be to brainstorm the public benefits of the program and to rank them.

5. Whether the program is seen as benefitting its host institution, helping it to fulfill its mission

When times and funding are good, organizations tend to be expansive in their visions and activities. But when those things become strained, institutions necessarily begin examining every detail of their operations, looking for places to slim down and to focus. It is important for the prospective traditional arts program to pay close attention to how it can help its host institution fulfill its mission.

In the case of the UAL, the institutional mission probably centers on education and preservation. The documentary work of a folklife program should fit very well into this mission. Other approaches could involve teaching, though this can be a difficult thing to manage, and it may depend on the skillset of the person hired for the position. A public folklore position is, first and foremost, aimed at the public. Teaching college courses may enhance that mission or may detract from it. Teaching takes a tremendous amount of time, and so does running a public folklore program. If teaching helps cement the future of a folklorist working at UAL, then it might be a part of the job description. However, I recommend no more than one course a year be taught by the folklorist. However, other teaching opportunities may be a better fit. The University of Arkansas is a land grant university, and as such has an extension, or outreach, mission. Workshops, public lectures, exhibits, and other public education activities work well for extension universities. One idea suggested by Dr. Gregory Hansen at Arkansas State University is that the state folklorist might conduct an intensive seminar or field school that could be offered in connection with ASU’s Heritage Studies doctoral program.

Recommendation: The program, from its outset, should be designed to assist in the UAL and university mission. The UAL staff and the folk arts advisory group should plan for how this should happen.

Recommendation: The teaching of college courses by the state folklorist (the incumbent of the new position) should be kept to a minimum, preferably no more than one 3-credit course per year.

Resource Assessment

In the course of my visit to Arkansas, I visited with many individuals representing many different organizational entities. In this section I will discuss those visits and evaluate how those individuals and organizations might relate to or interact with the proposed folklife program.

1. Arkansas State University

ASU was the most recent home of a state folk arts program, but for a variety of reasons they are no longer able to host the program. However, there is great interest among ASU faculty, staff, and students in working with a new program hosted elsewhere.

I met with a group of people at ASU. They represented the ASU Heritage Studies Program, ASU Heritage Sites, Arkansas Byways, and other interests. These interests will be important to the new folklore program, so some kind of partnership, formal or informal, should be developed between ASU and the University of Arkansas.

Contributions that ASU can make:

- Student fieldworkers
 - ASU offers a folklore minor, and
 - The Heritage Studies Program at ASU includes options in folklore studies and field techniques. U of A does not have a comparable program that could provide ready student workers, so a partnership should be sought.
- Heritage sites and museums that could be partners in public programs
- Faculty and staff who have knowledge and experience in public cultural programs
- Experience and archives of past state folklore work.
- Field schools that could tie in with the state folk arts program.
- The Arkansas Review journal—focuses on Delta studies, but could be an outlet for publishing items from the state folk arts program that have to do with the Delta.

2. Arkansas Arts Council

At the time of my visit, the arts council was in the middle of a director search. I met then with Marian Boyd, interim director, and Robin McClea, Artist Services Program Manager. Now (January 31, 2017), I see on the website that a new director is in place—Patrick Ralston, who has a background in historic preservation and state legislatures. Marian Boyd is now the interim director of the state historic preservation office.

This means that everything I learned during my visit may change. However, I think it appropriate for the U of A to go ahead and approach the arts council to start developing a relationship.

In addition to possible funding through the arts council or Arkansas Heritage, an important resource from the arts council is the biennial state arts conference, Art Links. The next conference will be in 2017, so the UAL people should look into offering some kind of session on Arkansas folk arts.

3. Arkansas Humanities Council

I met Paul Austin, director of the humanities council. He expressed great interest in the new folklife program and would like to be at the table as the program is developed.

The humanities council is officed in the Arkansas Studies Institute, an amazingly remodeled building in downtown Little Rock. It also houses the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, which has broad collections having to do with Arkansas history. It is also the sponsor of the online Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture.

We chatted a bit about the cultural regions in the state. One of the things I noticed throughout my visit was that the Delta and the Ozarks are both fairly clearly defined regions with identifiable cultural characteristics, but the southwestern part of the state seemed to have had less attention and less definition as a region. In folklore terms, the majority of work in the southwest was by Jan Rosenberg when she was at the Texarkana Regional Arts & Humanities Council from 1990 to 1996.

Paul Austin commented that southwest Arkansas seemed more culturally related to east Texas and its timber and farming industries. He said that south of the Arkansas River (roughly I-40 and I-530) was timber and oil country.

He recommended the online Handbook of Texas as a resource for that region, as well the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture. He also mused about a possible connection or collaboration between folklife and archaeology, which is administered through the state parks and the University of Arkansas. I find the connection fairly tenuous, so I wouldn't count it out.

4. University of Arkansas

I met with a number of people at the university, all of whom seemed eager to help support a folklife program. One of the main themes of my conversations with people was outreach—it is very important to the university as a whole. They also want to reach a variety of audiences.

The main folklorist on campus is Bob Cochran, who is nearing retirement, but seemed like he would do all he could to help with a new program—probably by serving on the advisory committee. He is the author of the primary biography of Vance Randolph, and his areas of study include music and gospel music in particular. He has traveled all over the state and could be a resource for general cultural information.

Bob knows people at several institutions in the state and could help pave the way for the folk arts program. He has connections at Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, the Shiloh Historic Site, and the Arkansas University Press, all of which could be helpful to the new program. Crystal Bridges, which is a world-class art museum featuring Arkansas art, is a project of one of the Walton (WalMart) family. It recently did an exhibit of folk art from the Museum of American Folk Art in New York. However, the definitions of folk art used by MAFA and public folklorists are quite different. I recommend developing a cordial relationship with Crystal Bridges and gradually finding ways to collaborate that meet both organizations' missions and needs. Bob says he goads the university press into publishing folklore topics.

U of A does have a cultural anthropology program—that is the closest thing to folklore there. There is also the Center for Arkansas and Regional Studies (CARS), which is an outreach program. This could be a very good partner for the folk arts program. Bob directs CARS, but there is no curriculum associated with it.

I also met with representatives of special collections and research services. The facilities for preservation and the interest of the staff are very favorable. Angela Fritz, the acting head of special collections, told me that there is an existing folklore collection in the library, which would be the likely repository for materials produced by the state folklore program. Special Collections has an outreach coordinator, Joshua Youngblood, who oversees large-scale public programs. Mr. Youngblood could be a great working partner for the folklorist in developing public programs.

Jeff Banks is the Assistant Director for Library Human Resources and Diversity Programs. He seemed very positive about creating a public folklorist position in the library system. He said the university chancellor wants to have a statewide presence—it is part of the extension/land grant mandate. A state folklore program could help with this. There is a priority for “giving back” to the communities of Arkansas and for accessible education—both good fits for public folklore.

One of the things we discussed was what kind of position the folklorist might hold within the university system. They have a status called “professional non-faculty” that might work. There is also clinical faculty which is another possibility.

Jeff saw that the state folklife program could benefit the university and the libraries by conducting outreach activities and creating content for the libraries' website. These activities would also benefit the folk arts program by providing a rationale that supports fieldwork and providing a place to get folklife research out to the public—something that can be difficult for some folklore programs.

5. Other Sites

In addition to the above sites, I visited a number of cultural and historical sites without talking too extensively to the staffs of those sites. But all of the sites I saw could be partners in public folklore programs. Among the sites I visited were the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History

department of the city of Springdale), the Fort Smith National Historic Site (National Park Service), the Crystal Bridges Museum (private foundation), the Delta Cultural Center (run by the state), and the Southern Tenant Farmers Museum (one of Arkansas State University's historic sites). And there are many others that I didn't have time to visit.

There seems to be a consciousness of heritage in Arkansas that could translate into broad support for the new folklore program. And in its own turn, the program could help the public broaden its sense of what "heritage" is by including not only the expected Delta and Ozark traditions, but also more ethnic and occupational traditions.

A Note About Oversight of the Folklorist Position and Forming an Advisory Committee

Throughout this report I have suggested possible roles for a folklife advisory committee. I will expand here on the concept of such a committee and how it fits into oversight of the folklorist position.

The folklorist will be an employee of the University of Arkansas Libraries and as such will be responsible to whatever hierarchy is established there. Performance evaluations, pay decisions, rules of conduct, and other personnel areas will be within the structure of the UAL. An advisory group as I conceive it would not have any personnel or policy oversight of the folklorist. This is one of the reasons I avoid calling it an advisory "board," which term could connote more power than a typical advisory committee would have. A variety of models exist.

Recommendation: UAL staff should talk with staff at other universities that host state folklorist positions (Oregon, Missouri, Arizona, among others) to get a sense of how things are structured.

Recommendation: There is a group of public folklore programs based in universities that have formed a loose organization for sharing information. They have a listserv that UAL should subscribe to immediately: U-Publore. It is administered by Emily Afanador, eafanado@uoregon.edu. There is also a report from a gathering of these programs that took place in 2014, paid for by an AFS consultancy grant. The report, by Brent Björkman and Lilli Tichinin of the Kentucky Folklife Program, was simply called "U-Publore Convening." It is available at the American Folklore Society website ([afsnet.org](http://www.afsnet.org)), at http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.afsnet.org/resource/resmgr/Best_Practices_Reports/Bjorkman_and_Tichinin_U-Publ.pdf.

A typical advisory committee should probably not be more than 6 or 7 people, though it could be a bit larger as determined by need. I recommend that it be weighted toward people with an understanding of public folklore in the U.S. These could be current or former folk arts coordinators from Arkansas or other states, folklorists situated at universities in Arkansas, or other folklorists. The weighting of the membership of the committee in this way will help to ensure that the committee will understand the mission and constraints of a state folklorist and

will help the state folklorist stay on track and keep the mission in mind. The rest of the committee could be made up of fellow travelers such as representatives of stakeholder organizations like museums, heritage organizations, arts organizations, community colleges, etc. Whether potential funding organizations like the state arts council or a local foundation should be on the committee is an issue that could be discussed. Such memberships could create conflicts of interest or control concerns that should be considered carefully.

Advisory committee members should understand that their roles are, in fact, advisory, providing ideas, advice, and support. They might also function as grant reviewers if the program develops a relationship with the Arkansas Arts Council that includes oversight of grants. The overall trajectory of the folk arts program should be under the supervision of the folklorist.

If there is a desire for an organization for other stakeholders or interested parties, the program could consider the creation of a “friends” group, e.g., “Friends of Arkansas Folklife.” There are pros and cons to such a group. It requires care and tending so that members feel involved. It requires tracking of members and their donations. It probably needs to provide some kind of incentive for membership, such as discounts to programs or opportunities to meet artists, etc. And it requires regular contact with members and promotion of membership to nonmembers. Ideally, all of this work would be taken on by a volunteer leader of the group rather than by the folklorist him/herself. On the positive side, a friends group, if constituted as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, can raise funds for special projects, host grants that perhaps the university could not, approach funders that the university cannot, and pass such funds on to the folk arts program for its use. Such a group also can be lighter on its feet, so to speak, able to respond to opportunities more quickly than a large bureaucracy like a university can.

SWOT Analysis

A simple SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis can help articulate some of the issues that should be considered by the University of Arkansas as it embarks on creating a state folklife program. If an advisory group is formed, that group could do a more thorough analysis and create a long-range plan for the program. For each strength and opportunity identified, the program should create strategies for taking advantage of those items. Similarly, for each weakness and threat identified, the program should develop ways of meeting and mitigating those negatives.

1. Strengths

- University of Arkansas Libraries (UAL) as a base for the program (stability, compatible missions, statewide outreach mandate).
- Location at UAL will mean extensive support systems (office space, tech support, archival support, program development support) will be available to the program.
- Widespread interest from key agencies like the Arkansas Arts Council, Arkansas Humanities Council, Arkansas State University Heritage Studies Program. This interest can translate into partnerships and financial and other support.

2. Weaknesses

- Physical location of Fayetteville in far northwest Arkansas means that it will be harder to get to and meaningfully serve communities in the southeast and southwest.
- Location of program at a university will carry with it possible perceptions around the state of ivory tower, remote, and esoteric.
- Even partial dependence on soft money can endanger the future of the program if funding sources dry up.

3. Opportunities

- The opportunity to create content-rich public programs because of the affiliation with UAL and its website and public programs agenda.
- Opportunity to create a statewide network in support of folk arts.
- Opportunity to develop broadly-based funding sources through the above-mentioned network.
- Opportunities for collaborative work across various university and community college systems as well as within local communities.
- The influx of new communities such as Latino, Marshallese, Vietnamese, and Hmong offers great opportunities for a folk arts program to expand the public's understanding of folk arts and to include such communities in the definition of Arkansas culture.

4. Threats

- Inevitable changing priorities at the university could mean future questioning of why a state folk arts program is located there and using university resources.
- Potential budget cuts to state and national arts support systems and agencies. Such cuts, from small percentages to proposals for outright elimination of arts agencies surface every few years, and the program should be prepared for these.