Setting Agendas and Designing Alternatives:
Policy Making and the Strategic Role of Meetings[1]

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of strategic forums – such as special commissions, task forces, roundtables, working groups, summits – in the policy process. Reviewing prominent theories about policy making, the author suggests ways in which strategic forums might fit within these frameworks as an analytically distinct policy lever. The paper examines existing literature on such forums, and identifies characteristics of "meetings that matter" – those gatherings that appear to have achieved some policy traction in a given domain. Finally, the paper investigates a particular field, cultural policy, to evaluate the extent to which meetings are serving policy purposes.

The author concludes that meetings can serve an important role in the policy process by framing public problems and highlighting policy alternatives; creating and sustaining policy communities; fostering policy transfer and knowledge uptake; and developing networks among policy entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, with regards to cultural policy, the author argues that, compared to other policy domains, strategic policy-focused convenings are not a regular part of the arts and culture landscape and remain underutilized policy tools.

Introduction

For the last three decades, political scientists, sociologists, and policy analysts have paid increasing attention to the process by which policy gets made in America. An area of particular interest has been the pre-decision stage of policy making – i.e., the dynamics of policy design (developing alternatives) and agenda setting (getting alternatives before decision makers). Scholars have proposed encompassing frameworks for understanding the events and actors that impinge on the policy process (Kingdon, 1984; Dye, 1995). Others have focused more specifically on its component parts–issue framing and the influence of the media (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Steensland, 2002); interest group behavior (Goldstein, 1993; Petracca, 1992); social movements (Meyers, 2003); the role of think tanks (Smith, 1991); and the role of academic research

(Hall 1992; McNamara 1998). Surprisingly, there is no research, at least that the author is aware of, that has examined the role of meetings and forums (and the reports that they generate) in the policy process itself; yet, interest groups of all kinds, along with most government agencies, participate in countless conferences and forums. It goes without saying that meetings are important – policy making relies on informal face-to-face exchange as well as more formal convenings, like hearings and legislative committee meetings. But what is the role of "non-routine" gatherings or what might be called "strategic" forums – such as special commissions, task forces, roundtables, working groups, summits? Are such gatherings important in generating alternatives and setting agendas?

To answer this question, this article begins with a presentation of a few prominent theories about policy making and suggests ways in which meetings might fit within these frameworks as analytically distinct policy levers. Second, based on a review of existing literature on strategic forums, I identify characteristics of "meetings that matter" – those gatherings that appear to have achieved some policy traction in a given domain. Finally, I will examine a particular field, cultural policy, to evaluate the extent to which meetings are serving policy purposes.

Existing Landscape

As mentioned above, meetings and special forums are a prominent part of the political and policy landscape. Advisory commissions and taskforces are perhaps the most widely used convening structure. Such advisory bodies are typically set up to study a problem or issue, have a fixed duration, tend to be well funded and staffed, and are often composed of distinguished individuals. Ginsberg and Plank (1995) contend that blue ribbon commissions are an increasingly common feature of the American political landscape. They write, "In fields as diverse as health care, nuclear energy, economic competitiveness, and race relations, governors and presidents have called upon commissions of experts to produce reports geared toward diagnosing problems and prescribing remedies. All levels of government have made use of commissions at various times, as have private organizations and foundations seeking to influence public policy" (3). Presidential commissions tend to be the most visible and most written about (Tuchings, 1977; Marcus, 1985; Flitner, 1986; Hollander, 1992; Plank, 1995; Deal, 1995; Linowes, 1998). Well over 100 commissions have been created over the past six decades. Examples include presidential commissions on Obscenity and Pornography, the Status of Women, Migratory Labor, Urban Problems, Heart Disease, Cancer and Stroke and the Commission on Libraries.

Second only to presidential commissions is the number and frequency of commissions and task forces set up to advise education policy. In higher education alone, there were more than 50 such commissions at the national level between 1929 and 1983 and more than 48 at the state level (Marcus, 1985, 27). If you take into account advisory groups established to deal with K-12 education, the 20th century has ushered in several hundred blue ribbon panels and commissions in the field of education. Clearly such meetings represent a prominent strategy for education reform in this country.

In addition to these high visibility commissions, there are foundation-supported conferences and special forums, summits, working groups, and a variety of formats aimed at fostering civic engagement or "deliberative democracy." In fact, a cursory review of meetings across several fields reveals at least 29 broadly different meeting formats, presented in figure 1, and loosely divided into meetings that foster citizen deliberation; education and awareness; policy design; political action; and policy

implementation. The grid is not exhaustive and I have certainly missed many interesting meeting formats (and there is likely overlap between many of the types listed). But, a quick glance offers ample support that meetings and forums are a well-established component of the policy process.

The Policy Process

In John Kingdon's field-defining work, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies,* he lays out a model of agenda setting that includes three separate streams, each operating relatively independently from the other. First, the *problem* stream consists of the set of issues that government, the media and the public believe are pressing and in need of attention. He suggests that problems come into bold relief when indicators change (e.g., unemployment rises) or by a focusing event (e.g., train crash). Second, the *policy* stream involves the set of alternatives, at any one time, that are being considered and debated. This set is drawn from a larger "policy primordial soup" made up of popular and less popular alternatives and ideas that are being circulated by specialists, academics, and think tanks. Finally, Kingdon discusses the *political* stream, or what others have called the political opportunity structure – i.e., the extent to which decision makers are receptive to new ideas and alternatives.   Kingdon emphasizes the importance of "coupling" -- when the three separate streams -- problems, policies and politics -- come together with the help of policy entrepreneurs who take advantage of windows of opportunity.   Kingdon's policy process is depicted in figure 2.

Although meetings and forums are not explicitly mentioned in Kingdon's model, a review of the scattered literature on task forces, commissions and special forum reveals several places where such gatherings might fit into his framework.   In the problem stream, it is clear that certain high visibility commissions, taskforces or summits might draw attention to changing indicators or might serve to re-frame and re-cast a problem in a new way (e.g., when the Kerner Commission reported in 1968 that the problem of racial unrest and violence could be recast as a problem of white racism). Other forums might serve to bring together special interest groups to identify and highlight a collective problem that was overlooked before they found a common voice and message (e.g., recent efforts to bring together libraries, museums, artists, scholars and free expression activists around issues of copyright and the public domain). Such convenings often reveal inter-relationships and potential partnerships that may lead to lasting coalitions as well. Finally, convenings can be used to vet and amplify the findings of new research that identifies a growing or urgent problem – that is, they can be the window dressing to call attention to an important report that might otherwise be overlooked.[2]

With regard to the policy stream, meetings and forums are essential. Clearly many commissions, task forces and advisory groups produce new research, informed analysis and debate-defining reports, upon which policy alternatives may be constructed.[3] Luck (2000), who has studied UN Reform Commissions, argues that it is hard to measure the short term impact of such reports, but that over the long term they serve to provide an "intellectual core" for a policy community and act as the impetus for future study and discussion. This was certainly the case with "A Nation at Risk" – a report issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 – which framed the debate and the research agenda in education for the next two decades.

 In discussing the policy stream, Kingdon also talks about policy communities – experts, scholars, policy activists, government program managers – who share ideas, review each other's proposals, challenge one another, and ultimately revise and improve alternatives. Kingdon suggests that in order for such policy communities to thrive,

relevant actors must know each other's ideas, proposals and research and must have strong personal contacts as well (117). In the U.S. health care field, the interaction between experts was formalized in a tradition called the Health Staff Seminar, funded by foundations, which brought together health specialists working in government from all over Washington, D.C. to hear presentations, think about common problems and meet one another in a quasi-social context (see figure 1, policy design).   In the cultural field, the recently established Preservation Working Group, which convenes preservation officers from across different government agencies and departments, along with representatives of the major national, nonprofit preservation organizations, is an example of a forum that was created to help strengthen a "community of experts" in and around heritage and preservation.[4]   Interagency forums, like the Preservation Working Group, can also serve as a tool to surmount bureaucratic obstacles by pooling resources across departments or agencies, or otherwise interjecting new ideas where government routines or departmental turf wars create stagnation and resistance to change. Finally, in terms of the policy stream, Kingdon talks about the importance of "tipping" or the bandwagon effect – where some ideas diffuse through the community and take hold, and others do not. This process of narrowing the range of options—where specialists join up and link up behind certain proposals -- can be activated by a well-timed meeting with the right cast of experts.

It is more difficult to identify a role for convenings in the political stream – where the daily pushes and pulls of power and influence seem to be largely immune from the softer sway of deliberation and convening. Moreover, meetings have little to do with the large-scale political changes (the turnover of an administration or department, newly elected congressional seats, political party maneuvering) that seem to determine when windows of opportunity open. On the other hand, if the political opportunity structure is closed to certain ideas (because of an economic downturn, deficits, political alignment or the adoption of new laws or policies that are at odds with an idea), perhaps strategic meetings can serve as wedges to open windows that might otherwise remain closed (e.g., a commission or a political caucus can result in the strategic re-alignment of officials or groups, creating an opening for a new idea). More importantly, a regular working group or roundtable or taskforce might serve to keep an idea alive – while softening up potentially important audiences – until the opportunity structure opens up, which may take years.   Finally, meetings and commissions can be used quite opportunistically by politicians, for example to sure up support for a pet project by providing expert, outside validation (experts who are chosen precisely because their opinions or research supports a decision makers prior position).   And, politicians may call for the formation of a special commission in response to a crisis or a politically intractable issue, hoping to reassure the public that the government is "doing something."

Finally, it is worth considering how meetings can help develop policy entrepreneurs. Strategic forums and commissions can provide entrepreneurs with a platform to try out ideas and an avenue along which to push them at the right time and access to decision makers (some of whom might serve together on the same commission or task force). They can also help entrepreneurs identify predictable policy windows likely to open in the future (e.g., when a meeting is organized around trying to assess the political opportunity structure and identify future openings).

Political scientist Thomas Dye (1995) has formulated a model of policy making that also draws upon the notion of a policy community, except that he focuses almost entirely on elite actors. In short, Dye suggests that there is a dense and overlapping network of influential leaders in government, business, academia, think tanks, foundations, and the media.   The relationships between these individuals are essentially the tracks along which policy ideas travel.   For Dye, policy entrepreneurs, if they are to be effective, must

come from within this structure of elites.   And, while Dye does not focus explicitly on meetings and convenings, his diagram of the policy world (see figure 3) includes planning groups and commissions as prominent "switches" on the policy track – bringing academics, foundation officers, think tanks and lobbyist in touch with decision makers. Suffice to say that Dye recognizes (though fails to elaborate) the critical role of convenings, especially as tools of the elite.

There is ample evidence, for instance, that private foundations have used convenings as important tools for influencing policy.   In the early 1990's, the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs in New York conducted a series of luncheon seminars to bring together overseas speakers and scholars in contact with U.S. business and government leaders in order to reduce uncertainty about foreign markets in an effort to spur investment and joint ventures.   The Rockefeller foundation created the Filer Commission (1973) in an effort to help the philanthropic community self-regulate thereby preempting Congress from passing unfriendly legislation.   The Commission led to the formation of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and the Independent Sector (Billant, 2000).   In 1994, the Pew Charitable Trusts held a meeting of environmental activists that resulted in the formation of a new coalition of local and regional environmental groups, the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition – which has effectively worked to stop clear-cutting, protect road-less areas, and conserve old growth in the National Forests.   And, of course, there is the work of the Century Foundation (previously the Twentieth Century Fund), which has sponsored more than 30 task forces, producing dozens of policy reports on topics ranging from public television to foreign relations, urban preservation policy, campaign finance, judicial selection, affordable housing and presidential debates.   While it is very difficult to make a direct causative audit of which task forces led to which piece of legislation or specific policy, a cursory review of government hearings, testimony and news conferences in the *Congressional Record* and the *Federal News Service* revealed more than 150 references to reports produced by Twentieth Century Fund and Century Foundation task forces over the last two decades.

Following in the tradition of Dye and Kingdon, more recent scholarship has embraced the notion of "policy transfer" or "knowledge uptake" as an important lens through which to examine how policy changes come about.   Essentially, this approach seeks to understand how governments learn from the experiences of other governments (policy transfer) and how decision makers locate, assess, and incorporate ideas from scholars and other experts in a field (knowledge uptake).   Under what conditions do decision makers seek to learn about policy activities elsewhere? When do they search for new ideas and alternatives? How do they incorporate new knowledge and research into their decisions? What sources do they trust? In turns out that recent scholarship suggests that meetings and convenings might be critical to this process.   For example, networks and personal interaction, fostered by conferences and forums, are thought to be crucial to policy transfer. In contrast, transfer is less likely to occur simply through the dissemination of academic reports and journal articles, electronic information, newsletters and other written information (Wolman and Page, 2002).   Using an experimental design, John Lavis and colleagues (2002) found that face-to-face dialogue that brings together academics and policy makers around a particular set of reports or findings (where informal discussion can take place) is more effective than when policy makers read the reports without the face-to-face exchange. Wolman and Page (2002) interviewed 260 officials involved in urban regeneration and found that officials relied on informal meetings and regular interaction (such as one-on-one exchanges, roundtables or study groups) as sources of new ideas and policy alternatives.

Effectiveness of Meetings

It is one thing to say that meetings are ubiquitous in the policy process, it is quite another to say that they are effective. Do government, foundation or nonprofit initiated commissions and strategic convenings influence policy? Many believe that such convenings are simply symbolic responses to problems (Bell, 1966; Flitner, 1986). Commissions allow politicians to deflect attention away from their own inability to adequately address an intractable problem – they can "appear to be doing something," while in fact simply postponing an indefinite future decision (Chapman, 1973). In a stinging rebuke, Paul Peterson of the Brookings Institute wrote, "The [commission] reports themselves prove to be disappointing. If we judge them by the standards ordinarily used to evaluate policy analysis, they simply do not measure up. With some exceptions, the studies do not address the most difficult conceptual and political issues. Instead, they reassert what is well-known, make exaggerated claims on flimsy evidence, pontificate on matters about which there could scarcely be agreement, and make recommendations that either cost too much, cannot be implemented, or are too general to have any meaning." (Marcus, 1985, 65).

While some may downplay the relevance of meetings (and the reports that they generate), there is simply not enough research or analysis to say one way or another. And, there is certainly plenty of casual or anecdotal evidence to suggest that the right kind of meeting can matter very much. For example, as discussed above, the reports produced by commissions and task forces of the Century Foundation have been frequently cited and referred to during legislative debate. This suggests that the ideas generated by these reports are circulating among decision makers. Moreover, scholars might trace backwards the development of specific legislation to see whether special forums played a pivotal role in its development or enactment. For example, Utah recently enacted a set of bills that address water use, transportation and open space in the context of managing growth and sprawl. Many of these laws derived from a set of proposals that originated with the "Utah Growth Summit" -- which was held by the governor in 1995 to engage the public and key decision makers in growth and quality of life issues. Public meetings were organized in communities throughout the state in advance of the summit. Three working groups (democratic based, republican based, and a non-partisan group of local officials) were formed to review proposals and set out alternatives; again, many of which were considered and enacted by the legislature.

In addition to examining whether the reports or ideas generated by a special convening circulate in policy debates or lead directly to legislation, we can also review the institutional legacy of a meeting. For example, did a meeting lead to further convening and forums? Did it lead to the creation of new institutions, groups, nonprofits or other organizations that carried forward its charge or its findings? For example, the Rockefeller Foundation held a meeting in 1994 at its retreat center in Bellagio that brought together scientists, public health officials, and leaders from the pharmaceutical industry and from non-governmental organizations to discuss how to move forward with AIDS vaccination research. Prior to that meeting, support for such research was politically untouchable. The meeting led to the development of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, whose continued program of research, advocacy, and policy development has put AIDS vaccines on the global policy agenda. The 1989 Education Summit convened by President Bush and attended by most of the nation's governors is another example. Many people credit this meeting with setting in motion what is still the central thrust of education reform in the U.S. – the development of standards, assessments, and systems of accountability for schools based on how students perform on tests. The Summit led to the creation of an independent government body, the

National Education Goals Panel and then to the establishment of a new federal funding stream to states to do this type of reform. So, the original summit helped to spawn a number of important institutions – the Goals Panel, a highly publicized state-by-state report card, an influential nonprofit organizations, Achieve Inc., that focuses on standards and assessment, and the Goals 2000 funding stream.

Given the lack of systematic research, it is impossible draw firm conclusions about the characteristics of strategic forums that lead to successful policy outcomes, such as increased public visibility for an issue; diffusion of recommendations in legislative or public debate; new rules or legislation; follow-up meetings; and new institutions. Nonetheless, a review of existing case studies in different fields (education and health), as well as Presidential commissions, reveals a number of important attributes.   First, strategic forums are more likely to effect policy when their recommendations are specific enough to force policy makers to "decide" something – vague recommendations, while easy to get consensus on, are equally easy to avoid or ignore.   Moreover, recommendations must be based on credible information and geared to the practical needs of policy makers. Similarly, the recommendations of a commission or task force should clearly state the reasons for and implications of each recommendation, paying close attention to the costs or consequences of inaction.

Second, reports and recommendations should be cognizant of political realities. They will be more successful if they take advantage of a "policy window" or reflect (and shape) the consensus of the political establishment. Luck (2000) maintains that the focus of most commissions is typically on "the logic and values of what they are proposing… But what they usually lack is a convincing political strategy based on hard headed analysis of the forces at work on policy makers and of how their proposals can be shaped or presented in a way to become a political – not just moral or rational – imperative" (103). In a related vein, convening bodies are often more politically effective when their goal is to study and recommend strategies for reforming existing agencies, programs departments or policies, rather than generating "wish lists" of new programs that require new appropriations.

Finally, strategic forums that are "open-ended," or designed from the beginning for sustained follow-up, are more likely to have a long term impact on policy. Plank (1995) argues that the convening process should be able to maintain excitement over time and not just create one big splash. To increase the likelihood of executive or legislative response, commissions should have some institutionalized follow-up. For example, commissioners might meet again after their initial report to discuss and evaluate the response to their findings – "putting public officials on notice that a public assessment of their response will be forthcoming" (Plank, 1995, 190). A commission might also be designed to produce a new organization or research program to carry forward the recommendations or discussion (such as the Independent Sector, a product of the Flier Commission). And, strategic convenings can be orchestrated so that they spurn additional meetings and conversation. For example, the National Commission on Excellence in Education led to dozens of special advisory groups being formed at the local level to engage in the issues raised in the Commission's report. (Wallace, 1995).

Cultural Policy: A Case Study

This final section discusses the implications of the above discussion on a particular policy domain – cultural policy.   First, I describe the unique policy challenges facing arts and culture (as compared to other policy domains). Second, I suggest that, given these challenges, meetings and convenings can play an important role in sustaining and

nurturing the emerging field and advancing policy. Third, I briefly describe the current landscape of meetings in arts and culture and offer a critique in terms of their relevance for policy. Finally, the paper examines a few instances where meetings in the cultural sector did manage to achieve policy traction.

Features Unique to Cultural Policy

To date, no scholar has attempted a systematic comparison between cultural policy and other policy domains (health, education, housing, transportation). Nonetheless, a few prominent differences are apparent.   With respect to the processes discussed by John Kingdon, one major difference for cultural policy is the lack of public salience or visibility for issues involving the arts and culture (with the exception of the NEA controversies in the early 1990s). This makes it very difficult to get issues on the public agenda.   As Kingdon notes, "the greater the visibility of the policy domain, the less important are crisis and disaster" in focusing attention and coupling the policy streams (95). In the arts, not only is visibility low, but there are few "focusing events" or crises that demand a policy response.   Second, there are few existing indicators, especially ones that can be counted on a regular basis, that call attention to potentially serious and urgent problems facing the cultural sector. Sectors such as housing rely on such indicators as new home purchases, rates of home ownership, number of abandoned properties, and number of homeless; transportation has statistics on highway fatalities, airline safety, U.S. dependence on foreign oil, and the capacity of public transit systems; in health care there are indicators for the number of uninsured citizens, per capita health expenditures, infant mortality, and the spread of infectious disease, to name a few. Again, the cultural sector lacks such indicators, especially at the national level. Third, compared to other domains, there are few well-organized stakeholders in the cultural sector that exert consistent pressure on the political stream. The combination of low public salience, few focusing events, and weak or diffused political pressure makes it very difficult to get cultural issues on the decision making agenda. Fourth, the cultural sector lacks a major public agency or department, where resources and decision making authority is centralized and where policy activity coalesces. Finally, the cultural policy community is highly fragmented with little agreement on common policy problems or concerns.   This last point deserves greater elaboration.

Margaret Wyszomirski (2000) writes at length about the problems of fragmentation in the arts community. "The arts community is fragmented, incomplete and uncoordinated... It is fragmented by, for example, discipline, generation, ethnicity, and geography. It is incomplete -- many community components are disorganized and key resources (information, evaluation and analysis) are woefully underdeveloped. And it is uncoordinated -- many community segments are essentially strangers to one another and have few occasions to interact"(100). According to Kingdon, a disparate policy community results in policy fragmentation, where "the left hand knows not what the right hand is doing" (119) – leading to unintended consequences, program overlap, inability to respond to crises and a failure to cultivate shared understandings of problems and potential solutions.

In such an environment, forums and convenings can be important tools for fostering more integrated policy communities. In health care, Wyzomirski mentions the role of the Health Staff Seminars in Washington. In science policy, she describes the Carnegie Corporation's five year Commission on Science, Technology and Government. She writes, "There are no comparable forums in the fields of arts policy or cultural policy...Such forums and activities are crucial to the maintenance and effectiveness of policy communities." (Wyszomirski, 2000, 99).   And, she contends, a strong policy community helps to: develop new talent in a field; position and raise the profile of

potential policy entrepreneurs; identify common issues and options; serve as a site to test, debate and refine ideas; and coordinate research and advocacy agendas. In short, policy communities provide the gel for ideas to take root, grow and have influence and meetings are, perhaps, the most important tool available to such communities.

Strategic Forums in Art and Culture: Coming Up Short

In many of the areas where cultural policy faces obstacles, strategic forums offer a promising tool. They can help develop well-functioning policy communities, they can raise cultural issues higher on the public agenda, define or re-define problems, exert political pressure, and coordinate policy approaches or administrative programs and resources. Nonetheless, a general scan of the field indicates that, compared to other policy domains, strategic policy-focused convenings (task forces, commissions, study groups) are not a regular part of the arts and culture landscape and remain underutilized policy tools.

Furthermore, those meetings that are organized explicitly around cultural policy issues tend to fall short of many of the criteria discussed earlier as being important for altering the public agenda or influencing decision makers. Arts meetings tend to produce reports with vague and general recommendations that have little direct connection to specific policy actors; they often discuss broad issues, but fail to clearly define problems that have immediate and recognizable consequences; they tend to over represent the arts community and fail to effectively engage other policy areas and leaders from other sector (they fall into the trap of "preaching to the choir"); they rarely take into account the political opportunity structure, nor do they include a political strategy to move findings or recommendations into action; dissemination and follow-up is often weak; special convenings and commissions in the arts tend to call for additional resources and new programs (e.g., "wish lists"), rather than examine how existing programs and resources might be improved (e.g., administrative reform); and finally, such convenings rarely collect new data, nor do they involve a systematic and rigorous investigation of an issue.

The American Canvas project, organized by Jane Alexander when she was chair of the National Endowment of the Arts, provides an example of a set of meetings that failed to influence larger policy debates or decisions. The project began with a national conference in 1994, focusing on four broad issues – the artist and society, life long learning in the arts, arts and technology and new ideas for federal funding. This meeting was followed by six privately-funded forums in different cities throughout the U.S.. The forums included local and national leaders in the arts, business people, religious organization, and civic groups and dealt broadly with the issue of "how to determine the value of the arts in communities and how to build a solid infrastructure for the arts in America's communities" (Larson, 1997*,* 171). Dialogue from these forums informed the deliberation of a steering committee as well as a final meeting of cultural luminaries, resulting in a report, *American Canvas*, that was widely distributed within the cultural field in 1997.
We can not fully evaluate the success or failure of the American Canvas project at this time. Nonetheless, it seems to us that this convening project (and report) represents a missed opportunity to have a long term impact on policy development in the U.S.. The final report is sprawling and ambitious, but lacks coherence, direction and clarity. The recommendations are vague and are disconnected from any immediate political opportunity. The report states that artists and communities must:

1. find ways to provide forums for some of the newer voices in the community
2. find new ways in which artists and arts organizations can bring art to the people

3. provide a forum in which both the economic needs of the arts, as well as the cultural and other services that the arts provide, can be discussed
4. determine the kinds of partnerships and collaborations that will be most effective in meeting the cultural and other needs of the community
5. move beyond the traditional role of the arts to recognize the ways in which the arts bring people together
6. develop a network of education, arts, and cultural organizations and institutions that are committed to arts education

These are just a representative sample of recommendations, but they fail to meet the basic criterion discussed above of being geared to the practical needs of policy makers. The report and the convening process itself, was not cognizant of political opportunities, nor targeted at any particular "window of opportunity." The report was covered in major U.S. newspapers, but headlines and lead paragraphs highlighted the finding that the "arts are elitist" and "out of touch." *The New York Times* ran an article with the headline, "Study Links Drop in Support to Elitist Attitude in the Arts" (Miller, 1997). Follow-up stories focused on the apparent controversy that the report was generating within the arts community. Rather than serving as a clarion call to redirect the country's debate on the arts (as a *Nation at Risk* did for education), the report served to highlight to the public the squabbles and disputes within the cultural community. Some might argue that the report changed the way we talk about the arts, ushering in the growing emphasis on "art in the service of communities" and the role of the nonprofessional and popular arts. But, as far as I can tell, the report did not spurn additional studies, nor did it serve as a coherent document to frame future conversations, task forces or policy initiatives.

Examples of Policy-Relevant Meetings in Art and Culture

While most convenings in the cultural sector do not achieve significant policy traction (although they may advance other equally important goals), it is worth pointing out a few exceptions. First, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, the Institute for Library and Museum Services and several national service organizations convened a working group in 1995 in preparation for the White House Conference on Travel and Tourism. The group produced a white paper on cultural tourism that was used effectively to place culture squarely on the agenda of the White House Conference. Not only was culture discussed prominently by the 1,500 delegates at the convention, but a one-day cultural tourism workshop was organized on the following day. Moreover, the meetings led to the formation of the Partners in Tourism: Culture and Commerce (a coalition of Federal agencies and eight national cultural service organizations) and to five regional cultural tourism forums, and a "next steps" conference in Chicago in 1998. Because of these efforts, cultural tourism is now a significant area of interest for the Travel Industry Association and virtually every governor's tourism committee or office has a substantial cultural component. In this case, the arts community should be credited with the foresight to convene a meeting, organize a coalition and issue a report in response to an approaching "window of opportunity."

At a more local level, the D.C. Preservation League used convenings as a tool to reverse years of neglect with regards to historic properties and landmarks in the nation's capital. In spite of strong preservation legislation, preservationists found that there was a profound lack of understanding at the highest levels of elected and appointed government of the value of historic preservation. There was also a lack of budget and staff resources for enforcement and insufficient training of building inspectors about the value of preservation. In response to this problem, the League organized a bi-monthly meeting to talk about how to enforce preservation ordinances and laws. These bi-monthly gatherings of local preservationists led to a "Preservation Summit" that

produced an action plan for the city.   The plan not only included very detailed recommendations for the Council, the mayor and the community, but it also served to "embarrass" city officials by holding D.C. up to other cities and states where preservation was more fully embraced. In the end, the meetings and the published report was used by the city to revise its preservation plan – including the creation of a new housing inspector devoted to preservation.   In this example, the summit recommendations were specific, targeted at decision makers, and focused more on administrative reform than increased appropriations. Further, the summit was able to use examples from other states and cities in order to call public attention to D.C.'s shortcomings, advance the notion of "neglect" and change the political calculus for city officials.

In Oregon, the Governor organized a statewide cultural summit in 1998 in response to an oversight and planning board's poll that showed a high percentage of the state's citizens were disconnected from their local communities. At the summit, the Governor issued a challenge to the state's cultural community to develop an ambitious and expansive cultural plan.   Then, through the passage of a special bill in 1999, the Governor and legislature appointed a task force to develop recommendations for increasing public and private investment in culture.   The task force was comprised of legislators and citizens and gathered information and ideas through forums and meetings throughout the state.   The task force recommendations have been described as a "ready-made" package to be sold to the legislature and its members were "built-in" advocates.   Ultimately, many of the recommendations were adopted including the creation of the Oregon Cultural Trust, which will create an endowment that will provide a permanent source of funding for cultural developments and the preservation of cultural assets (Dwyer and Frankel, 2002). In this case, convenings were used to add legitimacy for a cultural agenda that had the prior support of the Governor. In addition, the convenings built on a well publicized report, linking policy alternatives tied to art and culture to the newly identified problem of community attachment. This is an example of the "coupling" process described by Kingdon.   Finally, the task force served as a platform to recruit and nurture policy entrepreneurs and advocates, who became active lobbyists on behalf of the recommendations.

Further Thoughts

There are many other examples of policy-relevant convenings at the local, state and national levels. The above cases, I hope, demonstrate that if organized properly task forces, commissions, summits, forums and working meetings in the cultural sector can help achieve significant policy results. Whether in the arts or in other fields, meetings might be important tools in the following ways: 1) helping to frame or re-frame a problem; 2) calling attention to new and important research; 3) creating and sustaining communities of experts; 4) softening up audiences for a new idea or proposal; 5) sustaining the momentum for an idea during politically fallow times (when the political system is not receptive to a particular approach or idea); 6) fostering policy transfer and knowledge uptake; 7) helping policy entrepreneurs test ideas, develop meaningful and influential contacts and networks and predict or plan for the opening of future policy windows.

In sum, meetings should be viewed as important strategies in any field's policy tool kit, especially immature fields like cultural policy.   But, we need better theories and research about when, how and to what consequence special convenings fit into the policy process.   On the practical side, organizers need to think carefully about the problem, the existing political landscape and the best convening structure to accomplish their goals.   Should the meeting be commissioned by a government agency? Should it be

independent? Should it be funded by private sources? Jointly? Should it be bipartisan? Should it cut across sectors? Should it include experts and citizens, or just one or the other? Should it support new research? Should it be limited in duration or be ongoing? Should it be established only after elected officials are already softened up and prepared to consider alternatives? Or, should it be organized to create momentum for an idea from the start? When would it be most effective? The timing, structure, participants and specific mandate for a group can make or break a convening.

On the research side, scholars should examine more carefully the conditions under which different types of meetings are most effective. The type of meeting (from task forces to blue ribbon commissions to study groups), the range of participants, the intended policy outcomes (whether in the policy, problem or politics streams), the existing relationships between experts and decision makers are all factors that contribute to the likely success of a meeting. We need better theories and carefully designed studies that help better predict when and under what circumstances a meeting is likely to matter for policy.[5]

Notes

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[2] For example, The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) released a report in 2001 that highlighted "chronic problems" in the way federal agencies and departments manage historic resources owned by the government. The report identified hundreds and thousands of federal properties that were in danger from neglect and found that the federal government was not complying with existing legislative mandates. The report, *Caring for the Past, Managing for the Future: Federal Stewardship and America's Historic Legacy,* received virtually no attention or press coverage when it was released in March 2001 and has had almost no impact on raising heritage concerns on the agenda of decision makers. A strategically timed meeting may well have helped to catapult the report before the public, the press and government officials.

[3] It is worth noting that commissions can serve to extract new research and analysis (at no additional cost) from government agencies and departments. For example, executive orders and statues which establish commissions often direct all departments to cooperate fully and to furnish commissioners with whatever information or assistance they may require to perform their duties (Tuching, 1977). This cooperation often includes new research and analysis.

[4] The Preservation Working Group has been convened by the Center for Arts and Culture in Washington, D.C..

[5] See Walters, et al. (2000). This paper begins to develop a framework for thinking about what type of meeting is likely to be most effective under what circumstances. Key variables include: 1) the extent to which the meeting is structured (from well-structured, e.g., public hearings, to unstructured, e.g., neighborhood meetings); 2) the purpose of the meeting (define problems, generate alternatives, legitimate existing proposals, shift public opinion, build coalitions, etc.); 3) the nature of the issues under consideration (the degree of conflict; the number of stakeholders, quality of available information, number of alternatives, confidence in outcomes).

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