

# How Canadian Arts Organizations Build Real Connections with Government Granting Bodies

Jeff Erbach, Associate Vice President

Government funding for organizations, both operations and programs, are often considered in tactical terms, forms, deadlines, and budget. However, many successful grants, and finding success in locating an opportunity with the correct funding envelope, are built via cultivating relationships with the people in public funding agencies, arts councils, municipalities, and other levels of government.

In this edition of *Arts Insights*, we consider the strategies for arts and culture organizations to deepen relationships with municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal funding agencies. And while it is not possible to outline all the priorities and systems in every jurisdiction in Canada, the principles are translatable across a wide spectrum of opportunities.

## Funding Context in Canada

At the municipal level, funding often comes through city culture departments or arts councils. When held within city departments, funding can tend to favour projects that meet city-level strategic or urban planning goals, such as public art, festivals, community inclusion, strengthening local identity, tourism, and youth engagement, among others. If an arts organization understands the local cultural plan published by its city and aligns with it, chances for funding may improve. An arts organization in Ottawa, for example, might look at what the City of Ottawa's Cultural Plan<sup>1</sup> says about arts access, diversity, or public art. If the project speaks explicitly to those goals, that alignment should be deeply understood and referenced in an application. Priorities for these funders are often clearly articulated, but if misunderstood or unclear in any way, the organization has an opportunity to reach out to the funding agency. A preliminary conversation with a program officer, if possible, at the funder both deepens the individual relationship with that funder and provides more specific information on how best to position the grant application.

At the provincial and territorial level, organizations like SaskCulture, BC Arts Council, or Ontario Arts Council offer core support or multi-year operational funding and favour those organizations that show both artistic merit and managerial strength. This signals important organizational sustainability to the public funding agency. It is important to have strong projects and programs, but funders also want to see budget projections, governance structures, community impact metrics, and organizational capacity to carry out the plans that are outlined.

Federal bodies like the Canada Council for the Arts and Canadian Heritage play a very specific role. They often look to support work that has scale, innovation, national presence, or push boundaries in terms of equity, diversity, reconciliation, or cultural expression. Because of this, arts and culture organizations that think about deep and wide impact in touring, co-productions, digital innovation, and new audience development models stand to gain. When the Canada Council introduces "context briefs" for community-engaged art, for example, or when it publishes data requirements, arts organizations that have kept audience statistics, evaluation reports, and clear narrative about impact are likely to have an advantage because they can adhere to these requirements with substance, not retrofitted assumptions.<sup>2</sup>

When the Canada Council for the Arts published its Strategic Plan 2021-2026, "Art, Now More Than Ever," it emphasized equity, inclusion, digital innovation, and public engagement, among others. Organizations that paid attention to these criteria weren't just able to align their proposals more closely; those organizations began shaping projects so that the funders' priorities were visible in every narrative. It wasn't enough to say "we want to reach new audiences" - successful applications spoke to *how* the organizations would reach them, *who* those audiences are, any *why* they mattered.

For example, the Canada Council's *Artists and Community Collaboration Program* supports projects where professional artists partner with communities in collaborative creative processes. Understanding the council's

<sup>1</sup> City of Ottawa; <https://engage.ottawa.ca/culture-plan>

<sup>2</sup> Canada Council for the Arts, Context Brief: Artists and Community Collaboration

expansion of that modality allows an arts company to propose work that isn't only artist-led but deeply engaged with communities. That focus shifts a proposal from "arts project" to "community impact project".<sup>3</sup> Canadian Heritage, alongside the Canada Council, advances cultural participation and policy frameworks that sustain creative expression and connect the arts to Canada's broader social and economic fabric.

Public funders across the country value organizations that deliver to and for the communities that they serve. That means beyond receiving a strong proposal, funders want to know that an organization has strong governance, financial transparency, and demonstration of both past success and learnings that are being applied. Much of this is tied to the nature of government funding. It is taxpayer money being invested, so that comes with an expectation of accountability. For example, Canada Council's robust accounting practices require reporting, outcome measurement, peer assessment, and often evaluation of community engagement.<sup>4</sup> There are widely varying degrees of reporting required across the funding landscape, but organizations who can leverage the requirements, making use of the data in other ways, or in crafting the narratives which build on their reputations in their communities and amongst their peers, fair well.

### Fundamentals of Strong Relationships

Relationships with public funders often grow out of the intangible things like building trust, the storytelling beyond the numbers, and visible activity in their communities where individuals who work in or assess those grants see and hear from those in the organizations that they will potentially fund. Fundamentals of strengthening relationships with these people and the agencies include:

- **Trust** is built when an organization does what it says and when it has committed to doing so. Reports need to be submitted on time; project changes should be well articulated; challenges addressed; and successes highlighted. Organizational leaders should seek to be open and generous in meeting with program officers or a city department. They should also be willing partners within their cities and towns, provinces and territories, and on a national scale, if applicable, as positive agents of change. On the other hand, trust can be broken by acting in ways that an organization may feel is strategic but ultimately is felt as conniving. This can include trying to work around a point of contact to their superior, publicly berating the funder for an objective decision due to a sense of entitlement that the size and scale of past grants are an indicator of the future, or failing to understand a funder's goals and adhere to the grant application process.
- **Storytelling** is an essential vehicle for communicating value. Funders want a real understanding of how the work affects people, builds community, contributes to civic life, and enhances access. When the Canada Council speaks of the arts' economic, social, and cultural impact — such as in its "Time to Change the Story About the Arts" message — it is precisely those stories that shift how decision-makers see arts funding, not as bailouts, but as investment in resilience and belonging.<sup>5</sup>
- **Visibility in the community** is more than just about membership sales or attendance. If an organization's work is seen through media, partnerships, and well-documented community events, that visibility helps funders see that the organization is more than a project and serves as an ongoing contributor to the cultural ecosystem. Actions can include speaking for or against motions before City Council which touch on the work of arts and cultural organizations, support for tourism, and uplift municipal economic development plans. This builds upon the sense that the organization and its work is vocal, present, and indispensable asset to the community and is part of social, economic, artistic, and educational impacts.

### Building Connections at Every Level

One of the recurring themes in successful funding stories is the role of personal contact between individuals and stakeholder groups. It is not just about knowing *that* a grant exists, but *who* at the granting body cares about your organization's field of work, the kinds of risks the funders are willing to support, and the intended outcomes, as these matter most to funder. In practice, this can mean requesting a meeting before the application is written, providing a project summary, sample budget, or even potential impact statement as input to the grant, and then conducting follow up on eligibility, feedback, and future opportunities.

Relying on existing resources is also important. For example, Ontario Arts Council publishes toolkits like *Framing Community: A Community-Engaged Art Workbook*. Artists interviewed there talk about how crucial it was to "read

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<sup>3</sup> Canada Council for the Arts, Context Brief: Artists and Community Collaboration

<sup>4</sup> Canada Council for the Arts, Info Source 2025

<sup>5</sup> Canada Council for the Arts, It's Time to Change the Story About the Arts, Michelle Chawla, Director and CEO, October 17, 2024

the guidelines, talk with program officers, tailor the story to be feasible, rooted, and value collaboration.” Lookup Theatre’s “Talk to Youth Lately (TTYL)” program is a youth social circus program that draws funding not just because it is artistic, but because it is social, participatory, healing, and measurable.<sup>6</sup>

Organizations can benefit from having clarity about the roles of program officers, directors, and others decision-makers in government funding bodies. In many arts councils, program officers facilitate the peer assessment process. These officers can give critical context about an application to a jury and attempt to answer clarifying questions. If a project doesn’t quite meet eligibility criteria, it may be a stronger fit with another program, and a program officer can be a strong champion in ensuring program aspirations are finding the right opportunities.

In some municipalities where there is no arts council, members of the municipal administration either make the funding decisions outright or write recommendations to the City Council. Conversations with key members of the administration can be extremely beneficial if the organization appeals directly to peer assessors in advance of their application. For arts and culture organizations, a clear understanding of who inside the department is making recommendations and who is making decisions can be critical to success.

### From Thought to Strategy to Action

The following scenario demonstrates how a relationship-based approach unfolds in practice. Imagine a fictional arts and culture organization, perhaps a mid-sized theatre company in Nova Scotia called Maritime Stageworks, or just Stageworks. The organization wants to expand its outreach to rural Indigenous communities throughout the Province, stabilize its operations, and launch a digital streaming series. Here is an illustration of how the project may move from that concept to building consensus, receiving funding, and launching the initiatives.

- **Mapping and Research:** Stageworks reviews Canada Council’s strategy, the Arts Nova Scotia priorities, and their municipal culture plan (e.g. in Halifax). Stageworks identifies that access & inclusion, digital content, and community partnerships are emphasized across all three levels.
- **Initial Contact:** Before applying, the Stageworks leadership arranges meetings with the relevant program officers at Canada Council, Arts Nova Scotia, and the city’s arts department. Stageworks brings the project concept and preliminary budget, asks what kinds of risks funders are willing to support, listens to hear about successful past projects, and inquires about what challenges should they anticipate in proceeding.
- **Internal Strengthening:** Stageworks audits its financials, ensures the board is diverse, begins collecting data on audiences (including rural, Indigenous, and otherwise), sets up evaluation plans. Stageworks ensures donor reports are clear, and that their internal administration can manage a multiyear grant.
- **Application Tailoring:** For each grant, Stageworks tailors the proposal to reflect the funder’s specific language. For instance, for the provincial council, Stageworks emphasizes “Nova Scotia cultural identities,” for municipal it demonstrates alignment with “place-making in small communities,” and for the Canada Council it emphasizes national Indigenous reconciliation, digital reach, and innovation.
- **Follow Up and Visibility:** After grants are awarded, Stageworks publishes impact stories that highlight the rural outreach events, streaming pilot, and audience testimonials, among others. Stageworks invites funders to see work in rural communities, holds periodic conversations with program officers, and strictly adheres to written reporting requirements.
- **Long-Term Relationship Building:** Stageworks seeks additional operational funding to help sustain core capacity. The organization might partner with other organizations to jointly apply for regional support. Stageworks maintains contact even outside funding cycles by sending written updates, inviting funders to events, and thanking the individuals and agency for their support.

The kind of relationship-building demonstrated by Stageworks doesn’t happen by accident. It takes structure, systems, and discipline to sustain. Many arts and culture organizations have limited staff, budgets, and time. The risk of burnout is real. Embedding this approach into daily operations help ensure that government relations and funder engagement aren’t treated as one-off task.

Many arts groups find that what makes them competitive is investing internally in administration in this way, not as a cost, but as an infrastructure. A strongly supported application that features reliable bookkeeping, consistent

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<sup>6</sup> Ontario Arts Council, Framing Community: A Community-Engaged Art Workbook

record-keeping of audiences and demographics, and past project evaluations are all part of being viewed as a credible partner.

The highest level of connection with granting bodies is not when an organization applies and is funded, but when the organization becomes a recognized contributor to the arts ecosystem in ways that funders see them as a partner. That organization is consulted when the funder is setting priorities, whose evaluation feedback influences future program changes, and whose visibility in the community reinforces public support for arts funding. In Canada today, that means being proactive about equity, inclusion, Indigenous voices, community engagement, and digital/innovative forms of practice. Those aren't adjacent community engagement practices, they are core to what funding bodies expect. It also means arts and culture organizations must tell their impact story compellingly: not only "we made a show," but "we brought people together, gave voice, created belonging, contributed economically locally and built capacity for the future."

Undertaking these strategies consistently may strengthen an organization's ability to build deeper relationships with government bodies, which, in turn, may increase their success rates with available grants.

### **Final Thoughts**

Strong relationships with funders grow from trust, clarity, and shared purpose. When arts and culture organizations treat these connections as long-term partnerships, rooted in transparency, alignment, and impact, they move beyond securing grants to shaping a more resilient, connected, and vibrant cultural ecosystem.



### **Jeff Erbach, Associate Vice President**

#### **Treaty 6 territory and the traditional homeland of the Métis people.**

A devoted expert in cultural diplomacy and change management, Jeff Erbach has served the arts and cultural sector in Canada for more than 30 years. His profound work in arts education, reconciliation, equity and accessibility, and mutually beneficial partnerships within the nonprofit and government sectors has resulted in stronger cultural networks, higher resilience across institutions, and more inclusive programs. Creatively animating the economic, social, and cultural vitality of public spaces, he supported transformative placemaking initiatives and opportunities in municipal government with the City of Hamilton, as Manager for Placemaking, Public Art and Projects, and with the City of Regina, as Manager for Community and Cultural Development. A talented leader and accomplished cultural specialist, Erbach served as Executive Director of the Art Gallery of Grande Prairie and as Creative Manager for the

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, where he championed developing platforms for Indigenous artists to address Canada's residential school history, legacy, and its remaining impacts. Erbach was a practicing media artist for 15 years, producing a recognized body of film and video work on gender identity and expression which garnered a retrospective at the Canadian Film Institute in Ottawa.

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