

Grants and Acquittals

Speakers: **Bridgette Van Leuven:** Assistant Program Manager, NSW Ministry for the Arts
Penny Miles: General Manager, Arts on Tour
David Cranswick: Director, dLux Media Arts

Chair: **Kristy Wilson,** SAMAG Committee Member

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By Frances Derricourt

Despite the wintry weather, the May SAMAG Seminar attracted a large crowd of people, eager to get the insiders' tips on how to be successful in the grant application process. During the evening's discussion it became clear there is one major relationship an artist or arts organisation must foster in order to create the best application possible – and that is the relationship with your Program Manager.

The panellists represented three different perspectives on the seminar topic. To provide the low-down on the bureaucratic perspective was Bridgette Van Leuven, the Assistant Program Manager at the NSW Ministry of the Arts who is currently specialising in Dance, Music and Theatre. Penny Miles is the General Manager of Arts on Tour NSW, an organisation which works to make the performing arts readily available to regional and outer metropolitan audiences. She is also currently on the Capital Infrastructure Committee for the NSW Ministry of the Arts, and so is able to tell us about how decisions are made on who receives what funding. And to represent those on the receiving end of funding is David Cranswick from dLux Media Arts, a screen and media arts organisation which provides support to the development of Australian screen and digital media culture through a variety of programs.

The panel discussion kicked off with what is the most important aspect of the project – the artistic idea. Whilst some artists may feel the pressure to come up with an idea which fits into a certain grant category, the panellists all agreed this is not right. "Getting a grant and then finding a project to match it is a flawed way of going about it", says Penny Miles. She argues it is much better to be inspired by your own, original idea and then think about the practical aspects – how is the funding going to come about for your project and what is the best way of attaining that funding.

In order to answer these questions it is crucial to thoroughly research what projects and grants are available to you, and then to give yourself plenty of time to plan the application. Bridgette Van Leuven advises that this is when you should first begin that crucial relationship with your Program Manager. "It's up to the Program Managers to find new directions and it's important to build relationships with the funding body, because they're really up-to-date with everything going on". Program Managers can advise you on the best project to suit your needs and which you are most likely to get funded for.

The next step is to then consider how you are going to apply for this funding, and Penny advises giving yourself lots of time for the practical side of planning and budgeting. David Cranswick, who has experienced working as a solo artist, realises that for individual practitioners the grant application process can be difficult and time-consuming. The budget, in particular, can be a daunting task and he also recommends building that relationship with your funding body right from the beginning so that they can advise you on how to go about your budget in the correct way.

Bridgette describes the grant application process as one which involves a number of parties. If someone was to apply for a NSW Ministry of Arts grant, their application first gets registered and then delivered to the Program Manager. The Manager then does a summary of the application and all the information gets sent to the Committee. The committee have their meeting day when all the decisions are made and finalised (after much discussion), and the Ministry then summarises these decisions and gives to the Minister to approve. Bridgette points out that the whole time she has worked for the Ministry, she has not seen the Minister turn down any grant which has been approved by the Committee.

As your own grant application travels through this machinery of bureaucracy how is it going to stand out? How will you be chosen above everybody else as the person who deserves to receive the grant? Bridgette emphasises utilising all the information available to you and making sure you go through the guideline booklet carefully. "You really need to look at the objectives and how your project will meet them, because in the end it's public money and the ministry is accountable for everything it spends".

However Penny argues that it's one thing to make sure you meet the objectives, but that an application also has to inspire. "You have to realise that Committee members are receiving masses of folders, and yours needs to stand out". For Penny, this can involve quite simple things like writing good clear copy and dividing your writing up by headings. The application forms do not give you much room, and therefore you need to edit your copy so that your ideas come across in a concise and clear way, whilst conveying the aims and uniqueness of your project.

She also points out that there are 'hidden questions' in the application process. These are generally the questions you will be asked in the interview, which aren't necessarily spelt out in the application form. In order to help find these 'hidden questions', she definitely recommends having someone review your application, whether it's a colleague or a professional organisation. Arts on Tour is one example of an organisation which offers this review service, and your Program Manager should be able to put you in touch with other such organisations.

"It really helps to show that you're ahead of the game", says David. "If you've already got funding from other bodies then you're already on the way". It can also be really helpful to provide as much support material as you can with your application. For example, if your local council has given you permission to use a venue for your show, include the letter of permission from the council with your forms.

Overriding all of this advice, is the returning theme of relationship building. Penny and Bridgette both advise that you find out who your Committee members are. This way you can write your grant application with specific people in mind, and also contact those people if you would like to invite them to an exhibition or showing of your work. However, Penny emphasises that it is not a good idea to lobby your Committee members - "it's a much better idea to build a relationship with your Program Manager", she adds. The Program Manager can provide you with information on the Committee, and is also the one person who can really influence their decision-making process. Bridgette adds, "the Project Manager is the interface between the artist and the machine of government and really know the ins and outs of how things work".

The part of the process every artist dreads is acquitting the grant, and often the major concern is over a project which may have changed since they received their money. As David points out, it's natural that some things just don't work out. "The main thing is to keep the funding body informed and to be honest at all times." Bridgette adds that the Ministry are also well aware that projects can change, but that artists should keep their Project Manager informed of everything that happens. Because she is part of a government department which is audited, the artist or organisation must also provide her with a revised budget.

Penny agrees that acquittals are the worst part of the process, but the key to acquittals is being honest and also organised - "you need to set up a good administration system at the start which makes it seamless at the end". Just as you need to leave time to do a carefully planned and detailed budget, it

should also be part of your plan to know when the audit is going to come and how to go about your acquittal. When you're acquitting your grant make sure you send in the original budget and then have a variance column which takes into account any changes.

David speaks for the artists in the room, when he says that he would much rather spend his time on the business of art than in the administration of budgets and acquittals. However acquittals are a very important part of the grant process, and if you don't acquit your grant it can mean you will not be eligible to apply for funding again.

The talk on Monday focussed on government grants, but there are also private benefactors who can be approached. Penny recommends going to trusts which are already set up, as it's much harder to encourage a new company to support the arts.

For more information on the NSW Ministry of the Arts Grants program visit www.arts.nsw.gov.au

For details on SAMAG seminars and membership: www.sama.org.au or contact info@samag.org