CULTURAL STEWARDSHIP
SUCCESSION PLANNING INITIATIVE

Succession Planning in Tumultuous Times: Research, Resources, and Realities in the Arts and Cultural Communities

CONSERVATION CENTER
for Art & Historic Artifacts

✦Lyrasis®

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, cultural heritage and arts organization staff were adjusting to the new realities of the COVID-19 Pandemic and its effects on visitors and audiences.

As the pandemic shutdowns continued over parts of the next two years, libraries, archives museums, and arts organizations began to see attrition across all levels of staff and leadership. In the face of retirements and departures, there was growing concern about who would, and could replenish the workforce.

This was an especially acute concern related to the collections of these organizations – circulating and special collections, exhibits, business records, and programmatic history for all types of cultural and arts institutions. Without experienced, trained staff and active management of these collections, they were much more susceptible to minor emergencies, major disasters, and general neglect and deterioration.

Reduced staffing had other implications, such as declining income, influxes of undocumented objects, and workflow disruptions due to building renovations undertaken without staff input, among seemingly countless other challenges.

INTRODUCTION

When considering these situations across the arts and culture fields, staff members at the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) and Lyrasis/Performing Arts Readiness, two of the leading resources for preservation and archiving information and education, wondered about the level of succession planning that was being done at arts and cultural heritage organizations, particularly in those positions responsible for collections care and management. How many libraries, archives, museums, and arts organizations had written succession plans or processes that they were able to rely on in times of change? In what ways were organizations ready for staff transitions and knowledge transfer – whether unexpected or planned? To what degree were these cultural sectors facing looming organizational emergencies?

PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts partnered with Lyrasis to develop a suite of resources that support succession planning for collections care staff, artists and arts organizations, and related volunteer positions. The project has been successful in meeting its goals to assist cultural heritage and arts leadership and governing bodies in understanding the complexity of collections management and stewardship roles, to support organizational leaders in fostering growth within these positions, and to help ensure the continuity of care for cultural and arts collections.

Project activities began with recruitment of a **national advisory committee** including professionals from libraries, museums, archives, graduate training programs, and performing arts organizations across the country. The committee met three times during the project, providing guidance for each phase of the fact finding and resource development.

The project team conducted in-person and virtual **listening sessions** with professionals and volunteers to learn about the state of succession planning in the field, and nuances of succession planning strategies, including both staff transitions and knowledge transfer. In-person sessions were held at a variety of industry conferences, as well at targeted, invitation-only gatherings in Washington, DC and Philadelphia. Virtual sessions were facilitated through relevant professional associations across the field. There was significant interest in the topic, and the project team far exceeded the number of listening sessions initially proposed (six sessions reaching at least 50 individuals). Ultimately, we conducted sixteen listening sessions (seven in-person and nine virtual) engaging a total of 269 participants.

The team fielded a **survey** in summer 2023 to further expand the project findings, which were compiled into a comprehensive report, the project's first major deliverable. Over 150 responses were received and analyzed, including qualitative data. The key data from our research efforts, detailed in greater depth below, painted a concerning picture. Only one quarter of organizations have a succession plan in place or in progress, and two-thirds of survey respondents had experienced problems at their organization due to a lack of adequate succession planning.

PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Findings then informed the development of **resource materials** ranging from checklists to worksheets to bibliographies. These were shared initially with recruited reviewers, whose feedback was incorporated into revised resources. The project team presented a series of three webinars reviewing the project research, resources, and case studies about succession planning.

In Fall 2024 the team offered an **online course**, in which participants were encouraged to complete a "**Legacy Binder**," the culminating comprehensive resource from the project. The binder is separated into three sections that each address a different aspect of succession planning. The first two sections primarily deal with succession planning on an individual level and focus on documenting the processes, responsibilities, and knowledge needed to execute specific job duties. The third section looks at more broadly at succession planning as an organizational practice that may require or benefit from executive/board input.

While the project team initially aimed to **present** project findings at four professional gatherings, to date CCAHA and Lyrasis have shared findings and resources at more than 15 professional conferences nationwide, for groups including the Small Museum Association, the American Institute for Conservation, the International Sports Heritage Association, and the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums. This increase in engagement with the field has not only allowed us to gather a wider breadth of data to inform the type of resources we developed, but also expand our reach in publicizing those resources across the cultural heritage and arts communities.

Approximately 850 individuals have directly participated in the project listening sessions and presentations; hundreds more have been reached through views of recorded webinars and publication of the project resources.

KEY FINDINGS

Among the most important findings from the Listening Sessions:

The listening sessions yielded a rich range of insights, particularly since the project engaged representatives of organizations of various sizes and missions:

- A majority of listening session participants and their organizations had **little experience with any type of formal succession planning**, and **very few organizations have policies** regarding this issue
- Succession planning is a **low priority at many institutions**, but a **high priority personally** for employees.
- Many participants said their **Board was not concerned about succession planning for staff**.
- Recognizing and addressing **the differences between** responses to and demands created by **unplanned/emergency succession planning** and **standard succession planning** is important.
- There is a need for documentation and policies addressing succession planning, but many organizations noted the **need for basic collections and operating policies** (collection development plans, disaster response plans) as important foundational information that was missing at their institutions, as well.
- When developing documentation of succession, utilizing a "**knowledge transfer process**" to provide insights from experienced staff members to those new to or continuing at the organization was seen as very important.
- In one listening session, of the thirty-one attendees, **only six said succession planning was a high priority to their organization**.
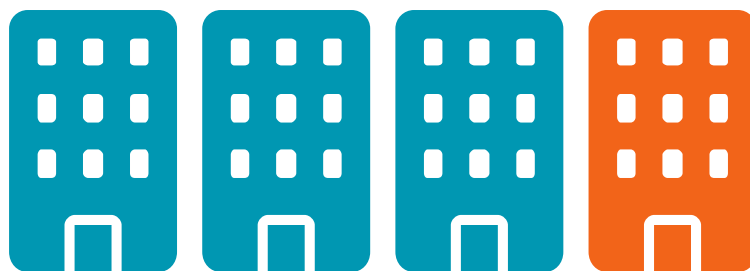
In each listening session, 75% or more participants said their organization did not have a documented succession plan policy

- There are **opportunities presented by new technology** such as video to assist with knowledge transfer.

> **"My boss recently said 'If I don't know, no one knows.' I fear he is planning on taking all the knowledge with him." - Listening Session Participant**

- Session participants reported that **not all succession planning experience was bad**. In particular, some attendees spoke about outgoing and former staff continuing to work with employees to ensure continuity in projects and at positions. There were even some positive final results reported by organizations in how they dealt with staffing and productivity issues during COVID.

- Researchers heard many concerns related to knowledge transfer, which made the need for it evident. A few participants talked about "institutional history that lives in people's heads, but is not written down," as the work and processes followed by predecessors has been largely uncaptured. "Poor record keeping creates problems for who comes after." "How can we help someone new understand what to do when the origins (of past decisions) are unknown," commented another. There was also frustration expressed in some groups with training new staff who then move on.

- A **wide variety** of resources and approaches have been used for succession planning at organizations. Since every organization is different from the next, what works for one will not be as effective for another; in order for the resources created to be effective, it will be important for organizations to find ways to adapt and apply them to their unique circumstances.

- Career advancement is an important aspect of the succession planning landscape. Many cultural and arts organizations had been focusing work on **diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility issues**, and an important aspect of these discussions is **compensation and pay equity**.

- **Issues of reductions in workforces and volunteer groups**, especially due to early retirements during and after COVID, have caused succession problems at organizations. However, while part-time and volunteer retention was a concern for some organizations during COVID, many organizations did maintain strong communications with their volunteer and part-time workers. As a result, these programs continued to be successful.

- **Strong volunteer programs with policies, procedures, and management** can help maintain good relations with volunteer and part-time staff in times of staff changes.

- **Emotional support** for staff at organizations where succession has taken place is important as staff may experience trauma during the transition; additionally, support for outgoing leadership, with a compassionate and generous approach, was also seen as important.

- It is important to **maintain relations with all of your partner organizations**, especially after new staff join a project. **Connections with the community** must continue for a project to be successful.

- **Trust can be broken** both within an organization and with external partners **if succession planning is not done or communicated well.**

- One overall barrier is the **lack of time to spend on succession planning activities**. There is a need/opportunity to shift "succession planning" from a finite task or event to an ongoing way of operating – continually capturing methods and key information, identifying and training possible successors.

# KEY FINDINGS
Project Survey

The Cultural Stewardship Succession Planning Survey was created with the intention of gathering further data on the current state of Succession Planning in the field to ultimately guide the creation of professional development resources to support succession planning efforts at cultural institutions. The survey was open between September 18 and October 31, 2023 and received 156 total responses. Key findings included:

When asked if their organization had any type of succession planning process or policy in place, **69% of respondents said they did not.**

When asked if there were any knowledge transfer processes in place to ensure smooth transfer of information, **only 3% of respondents said there were**.
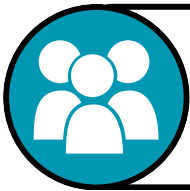
Overall, **66% of respondents said they had worked at an organization or in a department that experienced problems due to lack of succession planning**.
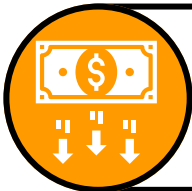
Named problems from lack of succession planning included **financial disruptions** (30% of respondents had experienced) and **disruption of momentum on projects** (85% of respondents had experienced).

When asked what barriers they saw in terms of an increased commitment to succession planning, respondents gave **lack of time** (75%) and **lack of policies or examples** (63%) as the primary barriers.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES AND POLICIES
Where Do Organizations Need Help?

There were a variety of areas and situations in a leadership or staff transition where staff noted that they often needed help. Among the key organizational documentation strategies, policies, and processes that every organization should have in place, which can help in times of transition, are:
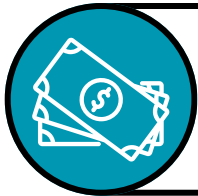
Documentation:
Information like account passwords, social media logins, onboarding documents, file naming protocol, vendor and partner contact list(s), and IT documentation.

Emergency Preparedness Materials:
Documents such as an Emergency Shutdown Plan and an Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan.

Financial and Budgeting Information:
Information on budgeting resources, nonprofit structuring, insurance, and legal concerns.

Institutional Information:
Guidance on timelines for when to review and re-evaluate policies, collections care policies (ie., pest management policy, environmental monitoring program), intellectual control over the collection.

Project Webinars

"Succession Planning for Cultural Institutions, Part One: Research Findings" - click here to view recording and resources

Leaders from the Initiative presented the findings of the listening sessions and survey, offering context.

"Succession Planning for Cultural Institutions, Part Two: Resource Roadmap" - click here to view recording and resources

Project leaders provided explanations of how to use key resources developed in response to the project's research phase.

"Succession Planning for Cultural Institutions, Part Three: Case Studies" - click here to view recording and resources

Catherine Dehoney, former President and CEO of Chorus America; Kahina Hayes, Executive Director of the Dance Institute of Washington; and Emily Smith, Executive Director of Philadelphia's Magic Gardens each presented success stories on their own succession planning journeys at their respective institutions.

RESOURCES

📄 Templates and Guides

Roadmap
A guide that contextualizes many of the resources developed throughout this Initiative, providing recommendations on working systematically through the succession planning process.

Legacy Binder
This document contains the full complement of templates and worksheets meant to capture critical information to support Succession Planning and knowledge transfer efforts at cultural organizations.

5 Key Questions Board Members Should Ask About Staff Succession Planning
An infographic detailing questions that board members should ask about an organization's succession planning.

Top 10 Things You Can Do NOW To Support Succession Planning & Staff Transitions
An infographic highlighting the top ten things to keep in mind during succession planning and staff transitions. These activities will ensure that your organization has the most critical information in the event of a succession emergency, but they will also help you build a framework for longer-term succession planning and knowledge transfer.

Job Analysis for Succession Planning
This template supports succession planning by examining key job tasks, functions, connections, and expertise. Each role should be examined in relation to the larger goals of the department and how the department interacts with other parts of the organization (if applicable).

Oral History Knowledge Transfer Guide
Conducting oral history interviews of employees at your organization can be a crucial and helpful part of the succession planning process. This guide provides helpful information and guidance for many steps of the process.

RESOURCES

Templates and Guides (cont.)

RACI Chart for Succession Planning
This template supports succession planning by examining the division of labor between roles in a department or organization. By mapping out who is Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed for and regarding various areas of work, the matrix can highlight areas of imbalance or need.

Succession Risk Advocacy Matrix
Making the case to organizational leadership (including Board members) may be more effective if expressed in a risk management framework. This matrix prompts thinking about the impact on key measures of concern - the organization's mission (measured in access statistics and similar performance metrics); the organization's revenue and expenses (expressed in dollars); and time and effort of staff (measured in hours).

Calendar for 30-60-90 Days After Starting a New Job
This guide offers suggested tasks and points of understanding to consider when stepping into a new role. The list addresses People (relationships); Policies, Processes, and Programs; and Priorities – so that new staff work on gathering information and understanding their approach to the responsibilities of the role and the knowledge transfer process.

File Naming Strategies to Aid in Succession Planning
The information in this document can be utilized to assist an organization in developing file naming conventions so that digital files are easier to find from project to project, and so that information is not lost when a staff member departs.

Essential Written Plans, Policies, and Procedures for Collections-Holding Institutions
Having written plans, policies, and procedures in place that assist in the governing, planning, and maintenance of collections is vital in order for institutions to have properly functioning and thriving collections. Policies and procedures are essential documents for any collections-holding institution to have in place. This document outlines many of the collections-related written policies and procedures that might help an organization operate with consistency, efficiency, and thoroughness regarding collections care and management.

Cultural Succession Planning Bibliography
A collection of publications and media on succession planning-related topics from outside CCAHA. This is a continually updated resource.

RESOURCES

Resource Findings

Succession Planning Initiative: Progress Report

Succession Planning Initiative: Impact Report

Succession Planning Survey Results Summary

For Further Research

There are many possibilities for further research on succession planning in arts and cultural institutions. While CCAHA and Lyrasis will continue to make tools and advice developed through this project available in the future, the organizations may not be able to support continuing research in these areas without further funding.

Some of the questions which future researchers may want to investigate include:
- How effective are the research reports and education materials produced through the CCAHA/Lyrasis Cultural Stewardship Succession Planning Initiative? Three to five years after the release of these tools, what impact have they made on the cultural and arts communities?
- How many organizations have developed succession planning policies in the three to five years after the release of this report?
- What are the long-term effects of the funding cuts which began in early 2025 on the staffing and everyday work of libraries, archives, museums, and arts organizations, and the continued care of their collections? Studying the impacts of these cuts in three and five year intervals, and determining the effect of future elections on Federal, state, and local arts and cultural organizations will be key to developing better succession planning tools and policies.

CCAHA and Lyrasis still welcome comments on this report and interest in future research projects based on the information presented here.

PROJECT TEAM

TOM CLARESON

Senior Consultant for Digital &
Preservation Services, Lyrasis

CAMILLA DAWSON

Preservation Services Administrator,
CCAHA

MICHELLE EISENBERG

Executive Director, CCAHA

DYANI FEIGE

Director of Preservation Services,
CCAHA

ALANNA SHAFFER

Preservation Services Operations
Manager, CCAHA

GREG STUART

Education Programs Manager,
CCAHA

ADVISORY COUNCIL

KATHERINE SKINNER CUDA

Independent Consultant and Lecturer, San Jose State
University School of Information

LINDA ENDERSBY

Collections Consultant, Curiosities Consulting
Company; Interim

CYNTHIA FALK

Professor, Cooperstown Graduate Program

KAHINA HAYNES

Executive Director, Dance Institute of Washington

EMMA SELFORS

Curator of Collections, Historical Museum at Fort Missoula

KIMBERLY SPRINGLE

CEO, GTMS Enterprises and Executive Director, Charles
Sumner School Museum & Archives

DEYA TERRAFRANCA

Research Library & Archives Director, Museum of Ventura County

*Learn more about the project's findings
and view the full suite of succession
planning resources and educational
programs at:
www.ccaha.org/succession.*