

# **GETTING YOUR BEARINGS**

## **An Introduction to NAST**

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE**

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# GETTING YOUR BEARINGS

## An Introduction to NAST

### WELCOME

NAST welcomes you, your expertise, and your interests to its work of supporting theatre study and the people engaged in it. NAST was founded in 1965. Since then, it has developed into an extensive effort involving **185** institutions. By way of introduction, this document provides information about three topics: NAST's objectives, its organizational structure, and its basic services.

### OBJECTIVES

The National Association of Schools of Theatre is established to develop a closer relationship among schools and programs of theatre for the purpose of examining and improving practices and professional standards in theatre education and training. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To establish a national forum to stimulate the understanding and acceptance of the educational disciplines inherent in the creative arts in higher education in the United States.
2. To establish threshold standards centered on the knowledge and skills necessary to develop academic and professional competence at various program levels.
3. To foster the development of instruction of the highest quality while simultaneously encouraging varied and experimental approaches to the teaching of theatre.
4. To evaluate, through the process of voluntary accreditation, schools of theatre and programs of theatre instruction in terms of their quality and the results they achieve, as judged by experienced examiners.
5. To assure students and parents that accredited institutions offering theatre programs provide competent teachers, adequate physical plant and equipment, and sound curricula, and are capable of attaining their stated objectives.
6. To counsel and assist institutions in developing their programs and to encourage self-evaluation and continuing studies toward improvement.
7. To invite and encourage the cooperation of professional theatre groups and individuals of reputation in the field of theatre in the formulation of appropriate curricula and standards.
8. To maintain a national voice to be heard in matters pertaining to theatre, particularly as they would affect member institutions and their stated objectives.

NAST builds its day-to-day work around four basic program areas that support its mission.

At the core of NAST's activities is **accreditation**. Currently, approximately **185** institutions in **41** states and the District of Columbia are accredited by NAST.

NAST accredits an institution when it demonstrates compliance with standards and guidelines related to the quality of the programs of study it offers, when its activities match published descriptions, and when it follows its own stated procedures.

NAST's accreditation procedures involve orientation and training sessions, institutional self-study, on-site evaluation, and review by the Commission on Accreditation.

Regarding the **professional development** of theatre executives, NAST has a triple focus. NAST assists executives to address key education and training issues in the development of theatre professionals; the broader philosophical issues surrounding theatre and theatre study; and the daily management issues faced by executives working in schools of theatre.

NAST's third major program area is **institutional research**. NAST compiles data, interprets it, then publishes and disseminates it to member and non-member institutions and the public. Dissemination happens in three ways: through (1) the NAST Annual Meeting; (2) NAST publications and projects, and (3) the annual reports of member institutions, and NAST's participation in the Higher Education Arts Data Services (HEADS) system.

In the area of **policy**, NAST works primarily in an analytical mode. Theatre study in free-standing schools of theatre, colleges, and universities is connected to a web of broader questions—free expression in a democracy, education funding, academic politics, arts policy, and many others. NAST helps its members to navigate these issues by making the link between analysis and local action. NAST policy reports often work their way into legislative testimony, reports of governmental task forces, the priorities of philanthropic boards, and the ongoing work of other arts and educational organizations. The primary purpose, however, is to help members think through issues deeply on the way to institutional decisions.

## ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTIONS

To understand how NAST accomplishes its mission and gets its work done, it is helpful to understand the organization's operational functions.

There are five basic functions. The first two are legislative; the next two, judicial; and the last, administrative.

All **policies and programs** of NAST, as well as the standards and guidelines for accreditation, are the work of the membership and the Board of Directors. Members of the Board are elected by the membership. Two public members appointed by the President, along with the Executive Director, *ex officio* and non-voting, complete the roster of the Board.

**Nominations and elections** are the responsibility of the Committee on Nominations, which consults with the membership as a whole and prepares a slate of officers for each Annual Meeting. Each year, two Committee members are elected by the membership as a whole, and two members plus the Chair are appointed by the Board.

The **accreditation of institutions** is the responsibility of the Commission on Accreditation. All Commission members, including the Chair, are elected by the membership as a whole. The Commission also has two voting public members, who are appointed by the President of NAST with the advice of the Board of Directors.

**Ethics reviews** are the responsibility of the Committee on Ethics, which considers any case properly brought before it under NAST's review procedures. The Chair of the Committee on Ethics is elected by the membership as a whole, and its two members are appointed by the Board.

The President has an **oversight** role, ensuring that the work of NAST follows the published policies, procedures, and protocols. The President also makes **appointments** and consults regularly with the Executive Director.

The **day-to-day business** of the Association is conducted from the National Office in Reston, Virginia, by the Executive Director, who is selected by the Board of Directors. The Executive Director hires all other full-time staff members.

The National Office staff carries out a broad range of functions including administrative management of the accreditation process, financial management of the organization, meeting planning, and record-keeping. The staff also carries out projects, and maintains extensive telephone, electronic, and written correspondence with members, the public, and other agencies.

## MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

NAST is guided by a set of basic and well-tested management principles.

The first is **autonomy**, which means that NAST is legally and organizationally independent.

At the same time, however, NAST strives to maintain **collegial and collaborative relationships** with other bodies and associations in the arts, education, and accreditation.

NAST's management philosophy is the same one that holds the United States together: the idea of **separation of powers within a democracy**. That means making a clear distinction between policy and operations so as to avoid conflicts of interest.

To put it in the simplest terms:

- The legislative and policy functions are the responsibility of NAST accredited institutional members and the Board they elect to represent them.
- The administrative functions are primarily the responsibility of staff. In the accrediting arena, the work of NAST evaluators is facilitated and managed according to Association protocols by the National Office staff.
- The judicial function is carried out by Commission on Accreditation and the Committee on Ethics.

In summary, those making accreditation decisions base their judgments on policies and standards decided by the membership; the staff carries out the policies of the Association, but does not evaluate institutions or programs.

NAST also focuses on its **service orientation** as an organization that meets the needs of its members. Typical of NAST's services are its publications programs and consultation with institutions preparing for accreditation visits.

Always, however, NAST's programs and organizational efforts are focused through the lens of its mission, which places **advancing the cause of theatre** at the top of the agenda. NAST strives to temper its efforts with a sense of humor that says: "We take our work more seriously than we take ourselves."

## NATIONAL OFFICE

For most with inquiries, the first points of contact and chief sources of information are the [NAST website](#) and the National Office staff.

The NAST National Office is open 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. weekdays, closed on major holidays and during the period between Christmas and the New Year.

The staff also manages the affairs of several other national arts and education organizations with missions similar to NAST's:

- The [National Association of Schools of Art and Design](#),
- The [National Association of Schools of Dance](#), and
- The [National Association of Schools of Music](#), as well as
- The [Council of Arts Accrediting Associations](#),
- The [Accrediting Commission for Community and Precollegiate Arts Schools](#), and
- The [Higher Education Arts Data Services](#) system.

Each staff member serves the same function for each organization.

## FINANCES

NAST operates on a balanced budget. In order to remain independent and to avoid competing with member institutions, NAST does not normally seek outside funding for its activities; it simply lives within its means.

## ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Although successful completion of the accreditation process is necessary for gaining membership in NAST, the Association has always viewed the process as **more of a helpful process than as a test**.

Accreditation is a useful way for institutions to:

- Plan for the future;
- Judge themselves against national standards and their own aspirations;
- Take stock of their achievements and needs;
- Gain evaluative assistance from peer experts.

Since a thorough review of the accreditation process is presented during the Self-Study workshop at each Annual Meeting, only the highlights are provided here.

Every newly accredited institution must review its program on a five-year cycle. All others are reviewed every ten years. These reviews always include a full self-study, an on-site evaluation by a team of at least two evaluators, and a review by the Commission. The institutional self-study is the centerpiece of the accreditation process. If new programmatic offerings are adopted between reviews, an institution must submit the offerings for review and approval prior to implementation. Circumstances may determine that an on-site visit is necessary.

NAST encourages those seeking and renewing accreditation to make extensive use of three fundamental resources available on the [NAST website](#):

- The [Handbook](#) contains the accreditation Standards and the Rules of Practice and Procedure;
- The [Procedures](#) contain the procedures institutions must follow, the Self-Study formats, and the procedures for on-site visits; and
- The [Policies and Procedures for Reviews of New Curricula](#) are to be used when adding, changing, and/or modifying curricula.

These resources are only the beginning. There are additional ways to find out about how the accreditation process works:

- Sessions providing a thorough overview of procedures and self-study are held during each Annual Meeting.
- You can visit the Association's website at <http://nast-accredit.org>, or [contact the National Office staff](#) by phone at 703-437-0700 or by e-mail at [info@arts-accredit.org](mailto:info@arts-accredit.org).
- You can obtain a list of names of individuals who might serve as an on-site [consultant](#). Of course, you don't have to be seeking accreditation to host a consultant. Consultants will be glad to assist you in solving specific institutional problems. Although NAST can provide a list of consultants, NAST does not guarantee that hosting a consultant will ensure Commission approval. Consultants are not hired by NAST, but by institutions.

## HEADS ANNUAL REPORT

Every NAST member must file a [HEADS](#) Data Survey (Annual Report) every year. This information is submitted online and compiled by the staff. Compiled data in the form of *Data Summaries* are sent annually to NAST members participating in the Survey to assist in their decision-making. A special feature of the HEADS system enables institutions to compare themselves against ten or more other institutions of similar size and type.

Because HEADS Annual Reports provide a composite, quantitative picture of each institution, the reports from each of the past three years are required as an appendix to the Self-Study in the renewal of membership process. Specific sections of all institutional HEADS reports remain confidential. Only National Office staff have access to them.

Informational sessions regarding HEADS are held during the Annual Meeting.

## ACCREDITATION AUDIT

In order to keep an accurate public record of each institution's descriptive information, NAST requests that every member institution update its accreditation audit every year. This information, as well as programmatic offerings, is published in a membership listing. The searchable online Directory of [Accredited Institutional Members](#) serves as an updated mailing list and provides current information about degree programs at each institution.

## PUBLICATIONS PROGRAM

Like many associations, NAST serves its members' needs through a variety of publications, primarily accessed from the NAST [website](#). You already know about the *Handbook* and the *Directory*. In addition to these, NAST publishes:

- [Notices](#), including official announcements concerning proposed *Handbook* revisions and Commission actions; Annual Meeting information; and other items of interest.
- *Executive Advisories* on breaking issues are sent out as needed, while *Briefing Papers* bring members up-to-date on issues, trends, and new policy initiatives.
- A *Sourcebook for Futures Planning* and its *Supplements* provide an extensive menu of techniques, approaches, and analyses for looking at a broad range of concerns.

The Association also publishes reports of special projects and studies in which NAST is involved. Examples include The Importance of Theatre in Historically Black Colleges and Universities; a Policy Brief on Creation, Performance, and Research; a joint statement on the Master of Fine Arts Degree and Faculty Policies with the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) and the National Association of Schools of Dance (NASD); special focus reports on Minority Access to Arts Education; Advising, Counseling, and Mentoring the Arts Student; *Sourcebook Supplement IV: Creating Your Self-Study*; Giftedness, Arts Study, and Work; Tough Questions and Straight Answers About Arts Accreditation; Distance Education and the Arts Disciplines; and Children and Youth, the Arts, and Public Policy: Present Urgencies for Higher Education. The comments and participation of members is actively solicited for the publications program. Ideas are also welcome, especially comments on issues and proposed changes in Association documents.

NAST, in conjunction with the other accrediting organizations that make up the Council on Arts Accrediting Associations (CAAA), developed a website devoted to [Achievement and Quality: Higher Education in the Arts](#) to assist individuals and institutions. This website is rich with information and resources that reflect a basic consensus by the representatives of over 1000 accredited institutions and programs across the disciplines of art and design, theatre, music, and theatre who seek broader public understanding of the nature

of what they do and how they evaluate it as experienced professionals. A link to the website may also be found on the <http://www.arts-accredit.org> home page.

## **ANNUAL MEETINGS**

NAST meets every year during late March or early April. All NAST meetings focus on professional development, while some also address larger questions of policy.

You are encouraged to attend the national meetings, not just as a professional obligation, and not only because NAST benefits from your participation, but because of what you can take home with you in the form of useful information, new contacts, and renewed friendships.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the end, NAST is like every other organization. You get out what you put in. But there are some simple steps you can take. To benefit immediately and often from NAST's services:

First, stay familiar with the NAST website and NAST publications, especially those related to the accreditation process. These documents may be able to answer a question before it turns into a problem. Become familiar with the NAST standards and accreditation philosophy.

Second, if you do have a question or concern, [contact the National Office](#). The National Office staff will do its best to answer your questions or direct you to additional sources of information.

Third, if you are an institutional representative to NAST, you are a conduit for information. Make sure you keep your faculty and administration informed about the things they need to know, and about how NAST may be able to help them.

Finally, we ask you to work with NAST to anticipate your needs. It is relatively easy for NAST to deal with institutional concerns in advance, but only when the staff, the Commission, or the appropriate Committee has been made aware of them.

In other words, it's in your best interest to use NAST. The Association exists to serve.