

Workshop: Folklife 101: State Folk Arts Programs

Presenters: Annie Hatch (South Dakota Arts Council), Sally Van de Water (New Jersey State Council on the Arts), Starr Chief Eagle, Lakota Hoop Dancer (South Dakota and Chicago)

Session Description:

Folklife 101: State Folk Arts Programs introduces some of the basic principles that inform public folklore practice, within the diverse agency settings in which state Folk Arts Partners work. This session offers a basic overview of folk and traditional arts as they are defined in public folklore work, including the types of programs in which public folklorists engage to document, preserve, support and present folk and traditional arts. These include fieldwork, grantmaking, and public programs such as festivals, exhibits, concerts, publications, websites, podcasts, documentaries, and more.

In addition to providing an overview of the field, the presenters model some of the ways public folklorists engage with the public, including inviting people to understand folk and traditional arts and to relate some of the basic concepts of our field to their own lives. The workshop culminates in an interview with Lakota Hoop Dancer Starr Chief Eagle, who has worked in various capacities with the South Dakota Arts Council over many years. This segment models a narrative stage, in which a folklorist interviews an artist(s) or community member before a public audience. This interview reflects a collaborative approach to working with traditional artists, as Starr co-curated the interview topics and questions.

The interview highlights Starr's perspective on the meaning of Hoop Dancing in her life, and how she engages with a state folklife program to support and share her traditional practices. Interfacing with the public through various programs offers her the opportunity to educate people about her culture, which she feels is very important. She reflects on Hoop Dancing as both rooted in Lakota culture while also a unique expression of her individual identity and experience. Starr emphasizes the importance of providing arts experiences to rural communities. She shares ways that she is currently expanding her repertoire with new culturally based artistic expressions and materials—illustrating the dynamic nature of traditional arts.

Throughout the session, the presenters respond to pre-registration questions, and those posed during the workshop.

Folklife 101: State Folk Arts Programs Log

Below is a log of the workshop, with time stamps that will allow you to find your way to topics of interest within the two-hour workshop.

0:00 Welcome and Introduction, Laura Marcus Green

Laura describes the FAP PDI, the rationale for presenting a new Folklife 101 workshop.

03:00 Laura introduces speakers: Annie Hatch and Sally Van de Water

03:30 Session overview & agenda

06:20 Icebreaker and overview: What are Folk Arts, Traditional Arts, and Folklife? Defining our work is part of our work, Annie Hatch

Annie Hatch presents a slideshow that she shares with the public when describing the definition and scope of her work as South Dakota's Folk Arts Partner. She is modeling a way that we can talk about folklife—an important facet of our work. She draws upon examples from her work with South Dakota and Wyoming traditional artists to illustrate her points.

While providing definitions of folklife, folk arts, and traditional arts, Annie weaves in an interactive icebreaker activity, an exercise in which participants create something by folding a piece of paper and then showing/explaining what they made.

10:00 Ice Breaker, Introductions

Annie invites participants to introduce themselves—their name, affiliation and location, and asks them to hold up what they made with their piece of paper. This is an icebreaker that Annie uses as a springboard for talking about the components of folk and traditional arts. Paper folding is a creative process that can express connections to a cultural community, family, or a pastime. This activity helps people see that we all have something in us that is part of a shared expressive culture.

21:30 Facets of Traditional Art:

Through a series of slides, Annie discusses these facets of traditional arts:

Shared community

Crosses multiple artistic genres

How folk and traditional arts are learned is important

Folk and traditional arts endure through generations

Folk and traditional arts are rooted in community, reflected in the cultural life of a community

Folk and traditional arts persist through generations, remain meaningful, while being constantly reinvigorated

Folk arts tend to resist going away, remaining meaningful and dynamic in the hands of individual artists.

Lakota Hoop Dancer Starr Chief Eagle shares information about Lakota horse masks and how they figure into Lakota culture. A horse mask was featured in Annie's last slide, about the dynamic nature of folklife and traditional arts.

26:52 Brief History of public folklore, Sally Van de Water

Sally provides some brief historical context, beginning with Bess Lomax Hawes joining the NEA staff in 1977 and seeding state folk arts programs and apprenticeship programs. Some of the other fundamental national folk and traditional arts programs took root at this time, including the American Folklife Center (AFC) at the Library of Congress (1976). The Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, as it was first called, was also established in 1976, in honor of the U.S. Bicentennial. The festival continues today as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The American Folklife Preservation Act, the legislation that created the AFC, includes a definition of American folklife that many folklorists draw upon when defining the focus of our work. Sally points out that defining our work can be tricky, since folklore and folklife are everywhere.

State folklife programs have evolved over time and are now housed at humanities councils, universities, museums, and other settings in addition to state arts agencies. The institutional setting where we work impacts how we define our work and which artists, organizations, and activities our programs can fund and feature. Some state folklife programs are a partnership between a state arts agency and another entity—a historical or cultural trust, a museum, etc.

32:25 Defining folklore, folklife, folk arts

Sally responds to a Folklife 101 pre-registration question: the field uses the terms folklore, folklife, and folk arts interchangeably. Are there instances where folklore and folklife are *not* folk arts? Sally responds that yes, there are such instances and explains how interpretations of these definitions are agency-based; these interpretations figure into funding decisions.

33:45 What Public Folklorists Do

The work of public folklife programs generally falls into three buckets:

- ~ Identify—fieldwork & documentation; much of what we do is grounded in fieldwork
- ~ Support—grants, professional services, community scholar programs, statewide networks
- ~ Present—festivals, exhibits, publications, websites, podcasts, social media, documentaries

35:25 The Products of Our Work

Our fieldwork and documentation result in various materials, including release forms, recordings, photographs, notes, and more.

Pre-registration question: How do we ensure that our work is relevant to and supportive of the communities with whom we work? Response: Building relationships with artists and communities is fundamental to our work. Fieldwork supports this.

36:52 Grants and Services

Fieldwork and ongoing contact with artists and communities help us to develop more relevant services through our programs. Sally lists the types of grants folklife programs offer, including apprenticeships, individual artist awards and fellowships, project grants, artist/professional services, community scholar programs, statewide network of folklife partners, among others.

Other programs or opportunities available through folklife programs include events, festivals, exhibits, publications, websites, documentaries, podcasts, artists showcase, social media posts, folk arts and education, and more. In some states, there are programs to bring traditional artists into schools and other educational settings. In these instances, there may be training opportunities to help artists develop classroom curricula.

45:00 Narrative Stage with Starr Chief Eagle, Lakota Hoop Dancer and Traditional Artist

Laura introduces Starr Chief Eagle. In considering the parameters and impact of public folklore, it is important to hear about this work from the perspective of an artist who has engaged with a state folklife program in pursuing her work. In this segment, we hear from Starr, who has worked with the South Dakota Arts Council for many years, and we also experience a narrative stage, an on-stage interview technique that folklorists use to present one or more artists in a public setting such as a festival, public program, or other setting. For this segment, Annie and Laura worked collaboratively with Starr to develop the topics and questions that Starr addresses during the narrative stage.

49:20 Starr Chief Eagle Dance Video

To see Starr's Hoop Dance tradition in motion, we watch a brief video clip of a performance at the Field Museum in Chicago (October 2025)

50:44 Narrative Stage with Starr Chief Eagle

Annie has worked in various capacities with Starr Chief Eagle through the South Dakota Traditional Arts Program of the South Dakota Arts Council. She asks Starr a series of questions.

Interview Question 1: What term do you prefer: American Indian, Native American, or something else?

Starr likes to answer this question as a way of educating people about her culture and traditions. She explains that context and personal preferences determine which term people favor. She explains the nuances of these different terms. She favors "indigenous" because it feels most inclusive, and transcends borders. What's most important to her is to have these conversations, and to try to dispel misinformation about her people and Native Americans, in general.

56:00 Starr talks about her cultural background, where she is from, and about her Hoop Dance tradition

Interview Question 2: Tell us a little bit about your Hoop Dancing, where you're from? If we could get a little context about who you are and about your dance tradition.

Starr gives an overview of contemporary indigenous life in the U.S. Often, indigenous people feel like they are living between different worlds—contemporary life in America and the drive to reconnect to their tribal/indigenous culture. Traditional practices such as Hoop Dance, music, storytelling, language, and visual arts connect people with their cultural roots, and are a sign of strength and resilience. Starr talks about the importance of the traditions she practices, in terms of her identity and educating others about her culture.

Starr talks about her lifelong experience of performing dance, sharing her culture, and educating people in various contexts. She also talks about the continual process of expanding as an artist, learning new things and incorporating contemporary expressions. She has learned beadwork, jewelry making, drum making, and singing.

01:01:00 Starr explains Hoop Dancing, its history, its meaning, how she is teaching younger generations this tradition. Hoop Dance is a means of storytelling, representing unity, balance, and healing. Starr dances with 22 hoops; she explains the significance of the number of hoops and how Hoop Dance has been part of her life.

01:05:30 Question from the audience: What do the hoops signify and can you tell us about the dance we just watched, please?

Starr explains the significance of the circle throughout indigenous culture, representing interconnectedness. She also talks about the importance throughout diverse indigenous communities of the relationship to the environment, nature, a relationship of respect. Starr explains that the Hoop Dance she did in the video clip represents her story and is unique to her. Each Hoop Dancer tells their own story through their dance. She talks about how the hoops are made, and how the materials from which they are made have changed over the years, from natural materials to pvc pipe and other man-made materials. She uses this to point out that indigenous people are not frozen in time, they evolve, develop new designs for their regalia, etc.

01:13:02 Annie points out how the facets of the art form are interconnected—music, dance, regalia, storytelling.

Interview Question 3: Could you talk about the terms “folk art” and “traditional art” in relation to your work?

Starr relates more to the term “traditional” than to “folk,” indicating that what she does is passed on from one generation to another. Annie shares that the South Dakota Arts Council uses the term “traditional” for their program, as it feels more inclusive, invites more people to participate.

01:11:40

Interview Question 4: Can you tell us how you first became involved with the South Dakota Arts Council?

Starr explains that she grew up watching her father traveling around the world and performing and teaching about Hoop Dancing. He has been working with the South Dakota Arts Council throughout her life. Starr began working directly with the SDAC through an apprenticeship with her father. She also was involved with residencies and performances at schools, museums, libraries, hospitals, and more. Eventually, she applied to be on the SDAC artists’ rosters. She talks about the importance of sharing her work in rural communities and how the SDAC supports that. Starr has worked with the SDAC from the other side of things, serving on advisory and grant panels, and providing input on their programs. She also seeks guidance from SDAC staff from time to time. She has learned a lot from reviewing other artists’ applications. Starr feels that her work matters. The SDAC has elevated her work and helped to get it out there.

01:21:55

Annie and Starr discuss the reciprocal relationship between traditional artists and the South Dakota Arts Council, and the impact of their mutual work.

01:27:30

Interview ends; Annie invites questions from the audience.

Starr shares that she is about to release a children's book and a musical collaboration in which she will be singing. The music will incorporate a mix of traditional and contemporary musical forms and instruments. These are extensions of her putting herself out there to educate people about her culture. She is starting to use light-up hoops—an example of innovation!

1:30:00 Discussion, Q&A

Sally shares pre-registration questions:

How common are folk artists and how many of them express their art as a full-time career?

Sally relates that there can be many answers to this question. Some artists return to or take up their art forms later in life, when they retire, while others are able to make their art form their livelihood. She invites others to weigh in on this question.

Several folklife colleagues share their thoughts and experiences with this issue.

01:34:00

Starr talks about how she became a fully supported artist—she didn't set out with that as a goal, but her love and knowledge of the art have opened up the opportunities that allow her to make her living through her art forms. She has been making her living as an artist for about eleven years. She has learned about grants, arts and education opportunities, and attributes her long-term relationships with various organizations to her ability to support herself as an artist. She discusses the importance of the knowledge about the business side of things and the energy she has available to put into her art form.

01:38:50

Question from audience: When and where is your next performance?

Starr had just performed that morning at Mt. Rushmore National Memorial. She has mixed feelings about performing there; she feels that performing there allows her to reach audiences she wouldn't otherwise reach. She'll be there again the next day. Following that, she'll have a necklace-making booth, a Hoop Dance tutorial, and a Hoop Dance performance at the Aberdeen Arts Festival (South Dakota). She goes wherever she gets invited—schools, libraries, etc. Allstate Insurance invited her to participate in a multicultural program. She has also worked with Sanford Health in South Dakota to provide programming for patients, as a form of art therapy. She talks about how rewarding

and impactful this experience has been, and about how she developed educational and art-making materials for people in those settings.

01:42:40

Annie asks Starr about adapting her performance during her pregnancy

Starr talks about how she listened to her body to know when she had to pause with Hoop Dancing and when to start again.

She talks about how her two-year-old son is learning Hoop Dancing and carrying on the tradition. He performs with her at the very end of her shows.

01:46:00 Sally thanks Starr and closes the narrative stage

Closing housekeeping details; audience members invited to fill out online survey

01:48:10 Laura asks Starr about the benefits of dancing to her health

Starr feels like dancing helps keep her healthy. Her father is an inspiration; he continues to dance into his seventies and he is proof that the dance contributes to his wellbeing. Starr feels that dancing benefits her physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Starr loves working with retirement centers and care homes. She sees how meaningful her work is in these settings. She loves connecting with elders, the wisdom keepers. It's important not to leave them out, to include them.

Last slide about upcoming FAP PDI programs