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Supporting Community Arts Leadership

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The woman on the phone was friendly but insistent. "Look," she said, "more and more artists and arts organizations are taking on cross-sector community-based work. But this is a complex gig, and, unfortunately, many of them are in over their heads." It was a blunt assessment, but I knew she was right. "Yeah, I'm seeing the same thing out in the field. So, what do you think is needed?" Her response? … One word: "Training!"

That phone call with Dyan Wiley at the University of Massachusetts Arts Extension Service ultimately gave birth to the Community Arts Partnership Institute at AES's Annual Summer Institute in 1995 and again in 1996. [1] Appropriately, the program was the product of a creative partnership among Wiley, community arts veterans Bob Leonard and Alice Lovelace, and myself. Our collaboration produced a highly experiential, arts-infused curriculum that emphasized the history and dynamics of social change, the development of equitable community partnerships, and the moral and ethical issues inherent to community-based work. The program was well received, and based on the feedback from participants, clearly needed.

Driven by a growing interest in community arts, over the next few years professional development in support of arts-based community development became an increasingly important aspect of our work at the Center for the Study of Art & Community. Building on the AES experience, we partnered with state and local arts agencies in six different communities to create locally responsive community arts training programs. These one hundred–hour intensive programs were led by a cross-sector faculty using a curriculum that was designed with and for local communities. Our participants also were cross-sector, split evenly between professionals from the arts and other community sectors (for example, human services, community development, public safety, health care, and education).

While most of these training efforts lasted only one or two years, two of them have persisted to this day and grown in both scope and impact. These programs, the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis's Community Arts Training program (CAT) and Intermedia Arts' Creative Community Leadership Institute (CCLI) in the Twin Cities, have been operating since 1997 and 2002, respectively. [2] Combined, these programs have provided long-term, in-depth, graduate-level study in arts-based community development for over five hundred fellows. They have also produced a growing and demonstrably effective network of arts and community development collaborators who are using the arts to help build healthy communities throughout the Twin Cities and St. Louis regions.

More of a Good Thing

Over the years we have continued to work with Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis and Intermedia Arts to explore new ways to extend what has proven to have been a valuable learning experience for artists and their partners from other community sectors. In St. Louis, the Tiger program has given CAT graduates an opportunity to conduct focused, in-depth research in support of their individual practice. Another CAT spinoff, called Place-Based CAT, has embedded the training in neighborhood environments throughout St. Louis. Farther north, CCLI has migrated to other communities, including Rapid City, South Dakota, and the twin cities of Duluth and Superior and Fargo and Morehead. Intermedia's initiative Creative

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CityMaking Minneapolis has provided a new platform for integrating CCLI-type training and arts-based strategies into the ongoing operations of five departments within the city of Minneapolis.

More recently, Intermedia Arts has begun considering how it can further extend the value of these learning resources to other communities and organizations. They have been particularly interested in how CCLI's demonstrated benefits can be made available in ways that are more accessible for participants and more affordable for local sponsors and supporters. In the spring of 2015, Intermedia Arts asked the Center for the Study of Art & Community to undertake a study to help answer this question. Accordingly, in the fall of 2015 we initiated a national research project to find out where community arts–related training is taking place and where there may be future interest. Partnering with Animating Democracy, at Americans for the Arts (AFTA), we identified a study cohort comprised of leadership from 423 local arts agencies who indicated their interest or involvement in community arts in the 2015 AFTA local arts agency census. In addition to training opportunities, we also looked at what kind of community arts activity and support was manifesting in these communities. The resulting report, *Options for Community Arts Training and Support*, was released in June 2016. [3]

Findings

This section shares six findings from the study that I see as particularly relevant to arts funders. In the section that follows I speculate as to why I think that is the case.

1. There is a growing trend among local arts agencies toward deeper levels of community engagement. We started our research with the expectation that recent growth in investment in community arts and creative placemaking would be reflected in our findings (i.e., more projects, more training, and more interest). What we did not anticipate was the large number of training programs we found (164), and the high levels of community arts activity (74 percent) and interest (90 percent) reported by our cohort. What we did not see coming was the 85 percent that indicated their strong interest in the incorporation of the arts into government service or even the 26 percent that are providing grants directly to non-arts organizations. In the absence of comparative data, we can only speculate on whether these are, in fact, extraordinary findings, but we were somewhat surprised. And given that this was a relatively quick field scan, we also feel that our data probably underrepresent the true dimensions of a rapidly changing art and community nexus.

2. Cross-sector arts partnerships are becoming a core activity for increasing numbers of local arts agencies. So, the question arises: Is this just a new funding fad that is likely to dissipate as soon as its national champions switch channels? Here are a few reasons why we think this is not the case:

- 74 percent agreed that cross-sector arts partnerships are central to their mission.
- 85 percent identified organizations from other community sectors (e.g., human services, public safety, health care, community development) as a key constituency, and 75 percent were actively partnering with them.
- 75 percent said their recent strategic planning process addressed "broadening the impact of the arts beyond traditional arts activities and venues" as a priority.
- 78 percent agreed with the statement, "we see ourselves as a change agent in our community."

From our perspective it would be a mistake to interpret this level of collaboration and commitment outside the bounds of the typical local arts agency mission as solely opportunistic. In fact, we see this as a possible indication that some local arts agencies are shifting their mission focus from "arts-centric" to community-centric. Specific evidence of this showed up when we asked respondents what they regarded as the most critical issues facing *their* community. Most responses reflected problems and concerns affecting the broader community as well as (but much more than) those relevant solely to their arts constituencies.

Issues that received the most mention included education, poverty, jobs, housing, crime, and the aging population. When we asked how they define their missions in regard to these issues, a majority described themselves as "full partners" relative to both arts and non-arts issues.

3. The art and community development universe is expanding. One intriguing question that emerged early on in our investigation was how we were going to identify the activity we were studying. Our approach was to cast a wide net by asking respondents to describe the community issues and outcome areas they saw their agency's work impacting. Three of the issues cited, "cultural policy" (82 percent), "education" (84 percent), and "youth development" (65 percent), are areas typically associated with local arts agencies. Another, "economic and community development" (83 percent), likely reflects both the fact that locals have been making their case for the arts in economic terms for some time, and the recent attention being paid to creative placemaking as a stimulus for both financial and social capital. Possibly more noticeable, given their strikingly cross-sector nature, are such areas as civic engagement (56 percent), leadership development (43 percent), community organizing (38 percent), the environment (31 percent), race relations (23 percent), and land use (23 percent). We see these relationships as further evidence of an increasingly expansive and adventurous cultural ecosystem that poses both opportunities and challenges for cultural investors.

4. There is both a need for and high interest in community arts training. The original impetus for the arts partnership training programs in the 1990s was the recognition by funders that untested artists needed new skill sets and support to succeed in community settings. As local arts agencies begin to invest more in cross-community collaborations, it is not surprising that their awareness of these needs is also increasing. Two of the survey's most divergent findings highlight this point. The first is the strong interest indicated (79 percent) in "learning about community arts training opportunities." The second is the small number of organizations (18 percent) that are actually providing learning opportunities in this area. This finding, along with a general lack of awareness of and access to existing training opportunities (see below), presents both a challenge and an opportunity for community arts educators and their supporters.

5. Defining the field and its intentions is proving a challenge. Another interesting aspect of our study was the abundant and varied terminology used by local arts agencies and training programs to describe the field. All told, we documented the following fifteen different names for community-related work:

- art for social change
- arts-based community development
- community arts
- community cultural development
- creative community stewardship
- creative placemaking
- cross-sector arts partnership
- cultural animation
- cultural community building
- cultural mediation
- cultural organizing
- healing/expressive arts
- public art
- social practice
- socially engaged practice

Considered broadly, we see this language as a reflection of the social, political, and economic forces that are influencing attitudes inside and outside the cultural community about the evolving role of the arts in twenty-first-century America. More importantly, these terms and the guidelines and descriptions that come with them provide a window into how local agencies,

training programs, and funders are coming to define the field. From our review, we would conclude that there is little consensus about what defines success or what skills community arts practitioners need to succeed.

6. The impetus for cross-sector arts engagement is coming from many directions. One aspect of our inquiry looked at what was driving local interest in arts-based community partnerships. Responses show that both interest and initiative are coming from many directions. On the arts side, 65 percent of our local arts agencies said they are actively supporting cross-sector arts partnerships. They also report that there is high interest from artists (64 percent) and arts organizations (71 percent) in this type of engagement. Intriguingly, more than half (55 percent) report receiving requests from other sectors for arts program support.

Varying definitions of the field were also evident in our examination of training opportunities around the country. With a certain degree of overlap, we found five general areas of focus:

- **Community learning:** programs grounded in the long-established relationship between the arts and education with a focus on the role of teaching artists in support of youth development, community-based education, and lifelong learning
- **Community building:** programs emphasizing that the arts can help build and improve community capacity and infrastructure with a strong emphasis on economic development and the generation of social capital
- **Community change:** programs that stress the historic link between cultural development and social change and the capacity of the arts to inspire and mobilize individuals and communities to organize and take action
- **Community health:** programs that advance arts-based activities that nurture and heal people and communities in support of health education, prevention, and community wellness
- **Community leadership:** programs that support art making and cultural practice as an overarching resource for advancing collaborative, creative problem solving and innovation across multiple community sectors

Implications for Funders

Funders have an opportunity to help redefine the role of the arts in community life. Some of our respondents saw a definite correlation between community-based arts activity and stronger local support for the arts. Many attributed this to their efforts to engage the public more broadly in ways that made culture more "accessible" and "inclusive." Certainly, working across community sectors is not a new thing for local arts agencies, but it is clear that the Great Recession forced many to question their assumptions about the place of art their communities and recalibrate their missions. It makes sense that the resulting cross-sector migrations have provided new ways for local agencies to translate their value to their communities and to enlist new partners to help them do it. For some, this has also provided the impetus that has tipped their community focus from the periphery of their programming to mission defining.

Cross-sector work can help expand the cultural economy. It is no secret that many in the arts sector experience the cultural economy as a perpetually small-pie operation under constant threat. It is also true that seeing oneself as inexorably poor can severely limit one's creative potential. We have found that this zero-sum landscape can shift significantly when artists and arts organizations collaborate and combine resources across community sectors. It makes sense that local arts agencies and other arts funders are exploring cross-sector, cross-disciplinary collaboration as a way of extending the depth and sustainability of their investments.

Vague nomenclature is potentially damaging. By definition community arts practice advances the notion that the work is going to affect people's lives. As such, the fusion of art making and community development is often a morally and ethically complex enterprise. In our work at the Center we have found that when the institutions supporting the work are

vague or ambiguous about their intentions or definitions of success, this lack of clarity can migrate to the work itself and harm the communities involved. Here is one reason why. Labels like *social practice*, *placemaking*, and *community cultural development* all imply community involvement of some kind. In too many instances we have found that scant attention is being paid to what this means exactly. At a minimum funders and practitioners alike should be considering some critical ethical questions as a part of their basic practice. How are the people who will bear the consequences of a project's success or failure going to be engaged? If some public benefit is part of the deal, is there any accountability built in? And when the curtain closes, who will be there to either sustain the good work — or pick up the pieces?

Effective arts-based community development training must be sustained over time.
Many of the training programs we found during this study are short-term, onetime, or episodic events. Like their colleagues in the community development and social services sectors, the most effective community artists have learned that there are no shortcuts to success, and that working across sectors in fast-changing communities is complicated and messy. As such, fostering patient, supportive relationships with colleagues and supporters is an essential component of effective community arts practice. The continuous building of a network of fellow learners over time is essential to this. We believe that the best way to build such a network is to support the development of the kind of regular training that has been established in St. Louis and Minneapolis. Our experience in more than twenty years in these communities shows us that these networks not only give access to practical resources but also serve to professionalize a field that is accountable to the communities they serve and committed to high standards and mutual support.

There is a need for infrastructure investment. Our snapshot of a study tells us that an increasing number of local arts agencies have been partnering with other community sectors to advance the healthy development of their communities. The result has been a proliferation of boundary-crossing, arts-based collaborations. Along the way, an increasing number of community arts organizations and educational institutions have recognized that the people involved in these collaborations could benefit from training that supports effective community arts partnerships. Our study of the field over multiple decades, though, has shown us that training alone cannot sustain this work. Both locally and nationally, this emergent field needs a support system that allows it to document, learn from, and validate its efforts over time. In addition to training, this infrastructure includes leadership development, research, advocacy, network and policy development, and, of course, material support.

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Local arts agencies are mission driven in service to particular constituencies and geographies. This characteristic is a principal reason why they were chosen as the initial cohort for our study. By definition local arts agencies are asking the kinds of questions that have given rise to a new impulse toward arts and community development. How do the arts contribute to safe communities? How can cross-sector arts partnerships help planners, police, health care workers, community organizers, and the like be more effective in their service to their communities? And at the end of the day what is the argument that the arts community must make to advance the integration of cultural resources into the heart of community life? We hope this study contributes in some small way to addressing these questions.

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Notes

1. All told, the AES institute planted the seeds for community arts leadership training programs in six US communities: Mississippi (statewide); St. Louis, MO; San Diego; Tulsa, OK; Minneapolis; and Delaware (statewide).
2. For more information, see Imagining America, "Collaborative and Rigorous Assessment: The St. Louis Regional Arts Commission's Community Arts Training

Institute," http://imaginingamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Community-Arts-Training-Institute.pdf; and Intermedia Arts, "Creative Community Leadership Institute Impact Study," 2016, http://intermediaarts.org/files/CCLI16_ImpactStudy_RD5.pdf.

3. Center for the Study of Art & Community, *Options for Community Arts Training and Support,* 2016, http://www.americansforthearts.org/news-room/americans-for-the-arts-news/new-national-study-options-for-community-arts-training-support-released-by-intermedia-arts.

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