

Business Volunteers for the Arts®
Arts & Business Council of Chicago

Tell us a little bit about your organization.

For thirty years, we have created a space where arts and business professionals can learn and grow, working together to provide real solutions for small and mid-sized arts organizations. With a mutual passion and shared interest, arts and business leaders, brought together by the Arts & Business Council, are at the front lines of ensuring a thriving arts scene and a culturally rich Chicago. A&BC's volunteer opportunities are designed to connect business professionals with nonprofit arts organizations in the Chicago area. We work with business volunteers to address arts organizations' staff and board needs as they develop and grow. Each year, our corps of over 300 volunteers works with dozens of nonprofit arts organizations. Our client organizations include dance, theater, music, and performance groups as well as arts education providers, nonprofit galleries, literary organizations, and cultural centers.

When did your BVA start and can you give us a brief history of it?

The Arts & Business Council of Chicago was actually founded as Business Volunteers for the Arts® (BVA) before changing its name to in 1995 to better reflect our programming and impact on the community. Our BVA program recruits and trains experienced business professionals, and then places them on pro bono consulting projects with small-to-medium sized nonprofit arts organizations throughout the Chicago area.

How active is your BVA?

Since its founding, A&BC has trained and placed more than 1,500 business volunteers on management consulting projects for nonprofit arts groups over the past 30 years. Our active BVA consultant pool is 350 individuals and we have over 300 arts clients.

How is it structured/operated?

Our BVA program is staffed by a Director of Programs, Management Services and a Programs Manager. The program is partially supported by a CityArts grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events and by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. Other supporters include the Alphawood Foundation, the Driehaus Foundation, and The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince.

How do you find and work with volunteers?

We recruit volunteers in a variety of ways. Our biggest asset is our current pool of volunteers. They are our greatest advocates in spreading the word to their friends and colleagues. We have cultivated several corporate partners that also assist in our recruitment where we go in and host informational sessions on how our program benefits them both personally and professionally. Online volunteer postings round out our strategy. All of our BVA candidates must go through an orientation session before they can become an active BVA consultant. This provides them with an overall assessment of the field, our clients' needs, and what it's like to serve as a BVA consultant.

How do you find and work with arts organizations?

Our funders are excellent partners in steering arts organizations in our direction for the services we provide. Many organizations hear about us through word of mouth from our current arts clients. Similar to our volunteers, our arts clients are an invaluable asset in spreading the word. All new organizations must participate in an intake meeting before engaging in a project with us.

How do you find and work with businesses?

We have developed our corporate partner prospect list from connections we already have through our board of directors and program participants. To be more strategic about the corporate relationships we're cultivating, we recently assembled a Recruitment Taskforce comprised of A&BC advocates who either have strong connections to companies on our prospect list or who are professionally involved in talent management. We are also currently undergoing an organizational strategic plan to consider how we can grow our involvement in the business community.

What has been the most successful aspect of your BVA, and what has been the biggest struggle?

We've developed new tools to support the management of the program. We implemented a Team Lead training program to solidify the overall stages and process of all projects. We've also just relaunched our online resource portal for our consultants to use.

Our biggest struggle is internal capacity. We are a small team that launches 40-50 BVA projects per year with 2-4 consultants on each project. We haven't figured out how to scale the program more since we know there's demand for it.

What feedback have you gotten from any of those partners, or do you have a positive anecdote you can share?

We interviewed several of our clients for our 30th anniversary and the stories they shared with us were very moving. Hearing their words of the value we provide to them that no one else in the city can offer them reinforced the impact we have on this community.

"The impact of the Arts & Business Council on 2nd Story has been really significant. [They provide] a kind of mentorship that has been an informal impact on the organization in terms of having a standard that they are trying to help organizations grow into, and then being able to codify that for us and share this with us so we know we have a target to point towards." –Amanda Delheimer-Diamond, Executive Artistic Director of 2nd Story.

What does the future hold for your BVA?

The future holds continued success for the BVA program. We are constantly evolving to keep up with current trends in the field and look for ways to further improve our program to better serve our consultants and clients.