

# CYCLICAL MENTORSHIP IN ARTS EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

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**Insights from Emerging and Veteran Leaders**



**A CONVERSATION BETWEEN**

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**TOM BUNTING AND DENNIE PALMER WOLF**



**AMERICANS  
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ARTS**

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# ABOUT & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **About Americans for the Arts**

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The mission of Americans for the Arts is to serve, advance, and lead the network of organizations and individuals who cultivate, promote, sustain, and support the arts in America.

Founded in 1960, Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts and arts education. From offices in Washington, DC and New York City, we provide a rich array of programs that meet the needs of more than 150,000 members and stakeholders. We are dedicated to representing and serving local communities and to creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts.

## **About the Arts Education Program**

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The Arts Education Program provides leadership development, networking, research, and tools that empower individuals and organizations to create equitable systems and strong policies which strengthen the arts education ecosystem. We seek to unify diverse stakeholders, including arts education professionals, cultural and education sector leaders, the business community, parents, and young people, to create change in their communities, states, and the nation.

## **About the Emerging Leaders Program**

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The Emerging Leaders Program identifies and cultivates the next generation of arts leaders in America. Through professional development and peer networking opportunities on the national and local levels, members contribute their enthusiasm, creativity, and potential to strengthening the arts in America and building the next generation of arts leaders.

## **Acknowledgements**

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# INTRODUCTION

Arts education programs nationally are challenged to serve an ever-diversifying student population. As trends in the field of arts education are maturing to reflect demographic shifts, leaders of these programs must facilitate meaningful and comprehensive succession planning to prepare the next generation of leaders in this important sector.

Unfortunately, while established and robust arts learning programs emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, **leadership in the field still does not adequately reflect youth served or communities in which the programs operate.** The challenges faced by these organizations could be aided by leveraging the strategies employed throughout the field of arts administration to diversify and broaden the leadership pipeline, empowering future leaders while simultaneously honoring and harnessing the great work of current leadership. These strategies can and should be explored to promote intergenerational dialogue and cyclical mentorship among arts education leaders.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

As the population of students served continues to change and grow in their challenges, needs, and demography, research shows that national organizations—such as Americans for the Arts—have a responsibility to broaden the leadership pipeline and build future leaders through intergenerational dialogue. A community-based participatory approach to research should be taken to connect youth, emerging and mid-career leaders (adults), and veterans (adult elders) to leverage effective strategies to honor community differences and develop sustainable missions. Among others, the higher education and nonprofit sectors have led strategic investments in capacity building of multi-generational teams for purposes of fostering dialogue to engage the next generation of leaders in a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable way.

In 2017, Americans for the Arts conducted research to illuminate effective practices of emerging and seasoned leaders in the field of arts education. The research was intended to inform the development of programming to assist in cyclical mentorship, intergenerational dialogue, and to support the broadening and diversifying of the pool of new leaders in the arts education field.

Research was led by emerging leaders and supported by mid-career and veteran staff and was deployed in a community-based, participatory manner. Researchers used a form of simultaneous storytelling and data gathering with participants to gather perspectives and generate authentic discussion. The following documented interviews are transcripts of the dialogues.

“You will be the very best at what you do when you build relationships one at a time”

Jean Tokuda Irwin,  
Arts Education Program Manager,  
Utah Arts Council

## FINDINGS

The overall findings from the research were grouped in several categories ranging from transformative moments in leaders' own development to suggestions for tackling systemic barriers to equitable leadership development.

Participants shared anecdotes about their times of growth and moments of challenge as leaders in the arts education field. For some, this moment of success was with an effective mentor and for others it was overcoming a systemic barrier challenging their race or socio-economic status.

All participants felt that systemic barriers impede the development of diverse leaders in the pipeline. They offered solutions such as shifts in the culture of internships, payment structures, certifications or inclusion of alternative qualifications, and changing certain aspects of the culture of arts or educational leadership.

Additionally, participants believed in the power to grow and change as emerging, mid-career, or veteran leaders through professional learning and leadership skill development. Suggestions included: building stronger relationships among broad swaths of individuals, engaging in inquiry-based research and management, developing a more 'facilitated' leadership style, and mobilizing your own practice as a student of your surroundings.

In a session held at the 2017 Americans for the Arts' Annual Conference, the topic of **'cyclical mentorship'** was proposed for consideration in a participatory session discussing the future of arts education leadership. This proposed cycle of mentorship begins as young people are mentored by adult arts educators, emerging leaders are mentored by both elders and youth, and elders are mentored by both emerging leaders and youth. This concept engages the broad concepts of intergenerational dialogue and artistic skill development to engage each other in shared learning and to have shared responsibility for the future of our field by way of the pipeline built to enhance leadership.

The following case study will highlight perspectives on these broad themes and is intended to inform and inspire emerging, mid-career, and veteran leaders to engage in this work.



### Emerging Leader in Arts Education

## TOM BUNTING

DATA & RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, INGENUITY

As the Data & Research Associate at Ingenuity, Tom supports the production of Ingenuity's annual State of the Arts Progress Report as well as the management and continuous development of Ingenuity's artlook® web applications. He works with community arts organizations and CPS staff to drive engagement in data-tracking systems and designs ways to support Ingenuity's core program areas through data-driven decision making. He has presented at conferences such as Do Good Data and the International

Conference on Social Theory, Politics, and the Arts, and was featured on an episode of Chicago's civic tech webcast, Big Shoulders. Tom holds an MPA and MA from Indiana University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs, where he focused on arts administration, nonprofit management, and policy analysis. While at IU, he served as a Research and Teaching Assistant and had his work featured in a number of publications. He also holds a BA in Music from Truman State University.



### Veteran Leader in Arts Education

## DENNIE PALMER WOLF

PRINCIPAL, WOLFBROWN

Dennie Wolf is a principal at WolfBrown and brings over forty years of experience in the fields of research and evaluation to the work of building equitable learning opportunities for children, youth, and families. She graduated from Harvard University where she trained in developmental psychology and served as a researcher at Harvard Project Zero for more than a decade, leading studies on the early development of artistic and symbolic capacities. While continuing her work as a researcher, Wolf has expanded her work to

include planning and evaluating a number of collective impact projects designed to build municipal and regional systems that support equitable creative learning in and out of school time (e.g., Big Thought in Dallas, Right Brain in Portland, OR, the Arts Expansion Initiative in Boston, Arts Assessment Project in Seattle). Through this work, Wolf has published widely on issues of assessment, participatory evaluation, as well as artistic and imaginative development, consistently arguing that creative work is a human need and a human right.

## Q: Please reflect on a transformative moment for you as an arts education leader from a mentor or mentee.



**TOM:** My transformative moment that I was thinking about is actually from outside the arts education field, but I think the lesson is generalizable. So, when I was doing graduate work at Indiana University, one of my professors there was Dr. Joanna Woronkowicz, who's done a lot of work in the arts field, particularly with cultural facility development, thinking about what communities are trying to accomplish by these large scale cultural facility projects. I took a class with Dr. Woronkowicz called Cultural District and Local Arts Policy. We had a partnership with the Indiana Arts Commission where the students in this class analyzed the state's cultural districts programs. We divided into groups and each of the groups was assigned one of state's officially recognized cultural districts. I think there were about five or six at the time. In our groups, we did a lot of interviews with people on site in each of these areas and our goal was really to understand deeply the objectives...the community, cultural, and economic objectives for these cultural districts. Then we would essentially analyze those objectives. So, we would pull census data, some of us administered surveys, and then we would present out on our findings and provide recommendations. It was kind of like we were consultants for a semester. The transformative moment in that class for me was, that was the first time I was really challenged to take something complicated and abstract and bring some sort of structure to it. You know, I could analyze it and understand it better. And I think that's a really important lesson for anyone in the arts education field, whether you're in a leadership position, or if you're in your organization's programs department, or development, or marketing and audience development, and that is being able to approach your work from a place of critical inquiry, by taking some curiosity or complicated question you have and bringing some kind of structure to it so you can analyze it.



**DENNIE:** Mine also first comes from outside the arts, but very relevant. So, over 30 years ago, I was mentored by Edmund Gordon, who is an African American researcher pastor, and civil rights activist. The lesson that I learned from Ed was the extreme importance of raising hard questions, and not backing away from them. But raising them in a way that presumed that everyone at the table or in the room would commit to solving them. So, what that meant was that no matter how heated or how difficult the particular moment was he had the capacity to remain calm, direct, and respectful. I have just always carried that with me.

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## Q: Are there systemic barriers to leadership within the field of arts education? What is one suggestion on how we might tackle it?



**TOM:** My undergraduate degree was in music education. Everyone I went to school with was pursuing either music education or music performance. I got to a point in school where I didn't

think being a classroom teacher for the rest of my life was what I wanted to do. And amazingly, I felt really stuck. I felt as though I was the one person in my cohort who didn't fit into one of the two buckets: performance or education. And on top of that I don't think my school really knew how to address that, or think about it, or help me realize that there are other options. So, doing some research on my own I stumbled into Arts Administration and also received my MPA in Nonprofit Management. I think I was a little lucky in that sense, but I know there are a lot of people I went to school with that went through a similar process that I did, so it seems there are a lot of people pursuing arts education or music education. They think they want to be a classroom teacher, and then get stuck in that field because they're unable to imagine other possibilities, or they want to do something else and don't realize how many options they have, including arts administration, researching the arts, cultural policy, community development, or education policy.

You know, there are a variety of ways you can plug into the arts education field. And those options weren't apparent to me. I think it's especially a problem if you're going to school somewhere outside of an urban center. I was in a rural setting and so those options weren't part of my reality. It seems like a problem for establishing a leadership pipeline in arts education.



**DENNIE:** I think I would make the argument that the pipeline has to be very long, and while the kinds of experiences Tom just spoke about are critical unless we do intervention much earlier than that, we will consistently have a problem with leadership, and particularly with diversity in leadership. So just to make that concrete I have been working for the past month with high school interns at the Queens Museum, who have been charged with documenting a project there. And what's become very clear is that they are extremely talented young people, who have, up until now, had less experience formulating their ideas, standing up for those ideas, listening to advice and critique, or absorbing that, and asking questions than they deserve. So, I'd say that as a matter of course, beginning as early as high school, we have to talk about internships, course work for credit in institutions, and other opportunities for young people. Moreover, those internships can't be about filing, or data entry, they have to foster the kinds of capacities that are leadership skills: thinking, writing, presenting, designing, taking criticism, revising, and bouncing back.



**Q:** What is the virtue of broadening the leadership pipeline for the field of arts education?



**DENNIE:** First, I think we need to start from ground zero. Typically, arts education tends to mean reaching music educators, or supervisors of arts teachers, or museum educators. But we really have to think about how the commitments and values of arts education reach and affect people who are designing IT, data analysis, signage, building design, and local government.

Secondly, we absolutely need to widen the capacities we seek to educate in the people whom we reach. So, the teaching artists I have been working with at the Queens Museum have to be

incredible educators. But they, in particular, need to be social activists, inventing ways that arts education equalizes learning opportunities. They also need to be scholars, writers, and critical thinkers to argue in public spaces that art can be, maybe ought to be, a form of social action.

And, absolutely, we need to diversify the pathway—whom we attract, support, and sustain. I think every cultural institution, whether it's a school or museum or symphony orchestra has a responsibility to have a long pathway so that they are bringing in, paying, and educating young people as early as middle and high school. If they are truly public institutions, they have to provide internships for people at college and CTE level. They have to pay and support their teaching artists to be more than program deliverers.



**TOM:** I appreciate Dennie's phrase "widening the definition." That speaks to me a lot because when Jeff initially reached out to me to ask if I would be a part of this project, and it was kind of interesting thinking of myself as an emerging leader in arts education specifically, because I don't really know if I think of myself working in arts education, per se. My job as the Data and Research Associate at Ingenuity is to push our organization and, in turn, the arts education sector here in Chicago to really be more critical in how we use data information to inform program design, policy decisions, etc. So, I guess I think of myself more as a leader in that sense, not necessarily as an arts education leader. I like that Dennie spoke to working in arts education could include web design, research and data, it could be working on programs like my colleague Nicole Upton, or it could be in philanthropy. There are a lot of different ways to plug into the arts education field.

## **Q:** What types of skills do you feel have a long-lasting impact on the development of leadership in your work?



**DENNIE:** I am a different generation than Tom...kind of long-form, dialogue, language-oriented person. People think of me as a writer, but I would say my deepest skill is the ability to really listen closely to what a whole range of people are saying, and to honor that wide range of positions. Leaders need more "we" than "I" skills—facilitation interviewing, summarizing a discussion with many voices, developing shared solutions. Even in this world that is increasingly visual and increasingly emoti-con oriented, there is never going to be a substitute for that set of skills. And I think we have to remember that and pass those sets of skills on.



**TOM:** I liked again your phrase "a wide range of voices." One of my colleagues at Ingenuity, our Director of Data and Research, has a background in conflict resolution. Observing the way he works with groups—even staff meetings—and helps us work through critical decisions has been a tremendous experience for me as a young professional. He has talked with me about one of his mentors who always did a really great job of conveying empathy when he was listening to a person

or a group. So, I think that that is hugely important in our field—being able to critically examine something but also conveying empathy for the other party.

For myself, I would also add as the Data and Research Associate, I talked about the nature of my job a little bit, but the skills that I learned in graduate school...I took one class in program evaluation that was incredibly helpful, and has helped me hone my analytical mindset, and I think just knowing how to put together a logic model and a theory of change, and being able to think critically about our programs was really helpful for me. You know I don't think it's the case, nor is it necessary for every arts education professional to become a master program evaluator, in fact there are PhD programs in that. But, just being able to put together a logic model and program design, or think through the change that your organization is trying to create in the world and how successful you are with that is really valuable.



**DENNIE:** And I would add to that some arts educators I have worked with are allergic to data, they feel it destroys the holistic or spiritual aspect of the work. They also worry that any findings that are not just 'plus' or perfect are unwelcome bad news, as opposed to information. I think leaders need to change people's mindset toward data in that way, thinking about it as information, as nuanced understanding, and not as a bad grade.



**TOM:** Yeah, I think that's a great way to frame it because it isn't just numbers and spreadsheets and running regression analysis. Simply putting together a logic model and bringing enhanced clarity to your program is a great step that all organizations should consider. I also think there's a tendency in any field, but especially in arts education, for people to develop programs and have a really strong belief that those programs are the correct way to address the social problem that they're trying to solve.

I think a program is really just a hypothesis for the change you're trying to create. So, you design and administer it, and then you should do some reflection and some measurement to understand what about your hypothesis can be updated. That way of framing it is a little less threatening than, you know, we're going to evaluate with numbers how your program is right or wrong. It's really about bringing enhanced clarity to one's work.

## **Q:** Do you have advice for future leaders in the field of arts education? What is your hope for the future of leadership in arts education?



**DENNIE:** I think one piece of advice is to have curiosity. Think of your practice in a very encompassing way. What are the set of human skills you need, what are the set of technical skills you need, what are the set of assessment and reflection skills you need? What is the depth of the field that you need in an art form to keep you connected? But I think very often

I go to university programs, college programs, or conservatory programs, they turn out people who have excellent, but narrow skills. And if the field of arts education morphs, it really needs to be more 360 degree education that yields lifelong curiosity—“Oh I don’t know how to do this, I’d better learn.” Because you’re never finished. So, you know I’ve been trying to learn graphic design, just the basics of it. And I’m hardly great, but it has had two benefits. One, better looking things, but also just returning to the process of acquiring a skill and being able to apply that to my own organization and clients, remembering that both the joy and the terror of the process.



**TOM:** I’ll build off of that, Dennie, and say that I think I hate to use the term “networking” but I think it’s important in that you get into a position, you become part of a community that is working to enhance the arts education experience for that area. In Chicago, for example there is an incredible constellation of actors trying to make arts education better for people here in Chicago. So, I think by networking what I mean is opening yourself up to other people who are sort of trying to address the same issue that you are, and being open to a wide range of ways to collaborate with one another and being open to the many ways to address a problem. I think just plugging into a community, and networking, and just being open to that goes along with curiosity, but it’s important as well.



**DENNIE:** I would like to underscore the fact that the pipeline is very long, and we can’t just leave it to, sort of, who goes to graduate school. We have to think about where this wider array of skills comes from starting in high school. And every single cultural organization has an obligation to contribute to that, whether it’s through internships, paid work, or whatever. And every single cultural organization has work to do in terms of ensuring that young people who come through that pipeline are not the usual suspects that characterize our leaders.



**TOM:** Yeah I would say as well...You had a question about broadening the pipeline, I am not sure that a pipeline has firmly been established yet, so there are kind of two questions there. I agree with Dennie that, it’s an awareness and education issue. Reaching out and making sure high school students know the range of possible futures that they can have within arts education as well as people who are going to college and graduate school. Being able to know there are opportunities out there to affect change other than teaching in the classroom is important. I am also very passionate about how learning just a few things about program evaluation can be useful to people in any position in a cultural organization.