COMMUNITY CULTURE: STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF ARTISTS AND CONNECTIONS

Local Arts Agencies can work with artists to strengthen the local culture by ensuring artists have opportunities to build community and to interact with one another.

When artists have opportunities to connect and exchange ideas with other artists and culture workers, and engage with organizations as decision makers to shape community actions and initiatives, they are an essential part of creating thriving places.

What's the Challenge?

- Too often, artists feel overlooked and left out of community gatherings and problem-solving.
- Artists often feel disconnected from other artists and isolated in their own community.
- COVID-19 offered some opportunity for new connections via online gatherings, but some artists don’t use these mediums and the more accessible online meetings occur less frequently since the pandemic shutdowns and cancellations have ended.
- Support for artists in the form of commissions, engagement opportunities, and other support varies across place and geography.

What Can We Do? Solutions to Try

Consider Creating Connection Opportunities

- Create artist convenings or cohorts to provide opportunities for local artists to gather for peer support, resource sharing, and feedback.
- Include artists in gatherings with other sectors, arts administrators, and other local leaders. This can provide an opportunity for building broader awareness about the needs of and challenges faced by artists.
- Create opportunities for networking between artists and others in community spaces beyond the arts community.
- Offer training and mentoring for artists to learn together.
- Reach out to and provide support for creative workers who may not self-describe as artists, broadening the cultural community.
- Create a one-stop-shop for services and resources for artists, like Arts Fairfax Creative Spaces

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• Promote artists for opportunities where they can use creative skills to engage and connect the community, offering new ways of bringing people together that are unique to the arts. Creative Greensboro (North Carolina) and Creative Portland (Maine) utilized the power of the artists in their Neighborhood Arts Program and Creative Bus Shelters.

Local Arts Agencies also realize that sometimes they are limited in how deep their organization’s reach extends. They feel that artists are uniquely equipped to join communities together and encourage connection in ways that agencies simply cannot. As one participant expressed, “cities and community leaders can think about engaging that kind of power (connecting with the artists) [by] asking them for advice on helping with certain community issues they are struggling with.”

Advocate for Local Policy

• Design and support policies for development of affordable creative spaces like shared co-working spaces and multi-studio buildings. BARCO (Baltimore Arts Realty Corp) has advisory services for the arts community and spaces tailored to the needs of artists and creatives that are affordable and secure for the long-term.

• Hire artists to serve as ‘cultural ambassadors’ to reach out to communities that have been harder to engage. Artists are often more skilled at this outreach than many government and non-profit agencies.

“We have been steadily increasing our cultural ambassador program where we look at who has applied to our grants, identify gaps, and pay a cultural ambassador to reach out to communities that don’t have representation. You have to increase the funds for those folks because it is a niche relationship…they are the ones helping us get grantees.”

- Anonymous LAA 2023

• Evaluate local/regional investment in artists compared to other places to uncover and address potentially uneven opportunities across different geographies.

• Consider incentives for working with local artists rather than inviting artists from outside the area to work on local projects.

• Promote artists as ambassadors for the local community to create a sense of belonging and desire to live in the area. The Cultural Office of Pikes Peak promotes tourism through their Creative Stays Program.

Many are trying to combat residents leaving for better opportunities elsewhere and feel art can be a powerful tool to make that happen. One Local Arts Agency participant discussed how their poet laureate applied for a community engagement grant and created a “poetry in the parks” project. People came to hear the poetry, look at the stars, and learn about light pollution, and the artist was able to engage their interests in environmental issues.

For more information about Americans for the Arts’ Supporting Individual Artists Field Research Project and findings, please read the full report or reach out to services@artsusa.org.