



DORIS DUKE  
CHARITABLE FOUNDATION



AUDIENCE & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 2018

## EFFECTIVE MINDSETS FOR AUDIENCE BUILDING/ COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There is no formula for engagement and no singular approach to achieving it. Each practitioner and each community must together forge the relationships and activities that will connect them in meaningful ways. There are therefore no best practices, per se, to share around this work. However, the more we explore the most successful initiatives and practitioners, the more we see that certain mindsets seem to support effective practice and meaningful outcomes.

There is a lot that practitioners, community members and funders have learned in the past few years about what works and what doesn't. What works is relational rather than transactional, sustained rather than situational and collaborative rather than imposed. Within these lessons are the critical mindsets that all effective initiatives have in common.

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### **IT IS NOT A REVENUE GENERATOR, IT IS A RELEVANCE BUILDER.**

Many of the arts organizations who began their projects with the intention of increasing box office income and/or developing new sources of revenue found they had to adjust their expectations as their work proceeded. Likewise, funders who anticipated that programs could generate sustaining support through earned revenue had to rethink their initial assumptions.

Shifting from a mindset of revenue generation to one of relationship building changes the dynamic between artist

and community, creating more a significant and meaningful connection and helping to establish or increase the relevance and impact of arts and culture within communities.

Unlike transactional models that assume that greater engagement will lead to higher demand and increased revenue, many of these programs do not directly generate income but do deliver mission and diversify participation. While organizations have increasingly broken away from traditional transactional expectations, no one has yet figured out how to effectively monetize or sustainably support the activities of engagement.

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### **IT IS NOT ONE AND DONE.**

Transformation takes time. We repeatedly heard from practitioners that they could not do this work effectively on a short-term or project basis. To make a lasting change in the way that artists and organizations are viewed within their communities requires sustained engagement. In fact, damage

can be done if arts organizations undertake this work as a one-off project since communities who become involved in relationships and programming often feel manipulated when artists and organizations move on to other projects or communities after encouraging them to participate.

Further, these initiatives often require considerable planning, relationship and trust building activity up front, before it is even possible to launch programs. Without the time to build these components at the outset, the work doesn't reach its intended audience or have the anticipated outcomes.

While funders are responding with multi-year grants and planning support, the sustainability issue remains a considerable barrier as an organization must commit at the outset, often without knowing where ongoing support will come from.

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### **IT REQUIRES HUMILITY AND A LEARNING MINDSET.**

One of the exciting aspects of this work for organizations and artists who have engaged deeply with it is the feeling of being immersed in a completely new situation. While it lacks the comfort of the familiar, it gives practitioners an opportunity to rethink the work, gain new perspectives and build new capacities. Of course, in order to do so, they must come to the work with a 'learner's mind', not positioning themselves as the expert but recognizing what they don't know and embracing the opportunity to learn and change.

It also means accepting and learning from mistakes and failures along the way. In the high stakes environment of the nonprofit arts where resources are scarce, there has long been a reticence to acknowledge or share failures for fear that resources will be withdrawn if something is not seen to be universally successful. We need to shift that mindset as practitioners, advocates and funders for this work and recognize that learning from mistakes will help us to improve and sharing failures will help others to follow and succeed.

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### **IT TAKES A VILLAGE...AND A COMMUNITY.**

There are artists and organizations who have been engaging communities through the arts for many years and there are community organizations who have long-lasting and trusting relationships throughout their communities. Recognizing that these existing structures, while sometimes less recognized and under-resourced, are valuable and important partners

with knowledge and networks can significantly impact audience building/community engagement practices. An organization or artist who has been able to attract support and interest around their engagement initiative can certainly try to go it alone but they will undoubtedly find more success if they embrace partnership and collaboration opportunities along the way. Sharing resources with a larger team generates returns in robust networks and relationships and access to unique skills, perspectives and knowledge.

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Not only does building a team and partnerships around the work increase its potential impact, but involving community members in meaningful ways throughout the process also improves the work and its outcomes. Those organizations who included community members in planning, shaping, executing and evaluating their initiatives received greater buy-in and longer-term impacts than those who did not.

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### **IT STARTS WHERE THEY ARE.**

Sometimes metaphorically and sometimes quite literally, the arts professionals embarking on this work must be prepared to go to their community and meet them where they are. This may mean moving outside of arts spaces and joining community members in community spaces and social clubs, or it may mean learning about and engaging with new technology platforms. It might require understanding and adopting different social norms and behaviors, or it may mean exploring unfamiliar beliefs and values.

## IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU, IT'S ABOUT THEM.

An artist or organization may have a creative idea about how they want to connect with a community – what issues and opportunities they would prefer to explore – but it is only when audience building/community engagement initiatives focus on the community's needs and desires that these projects really have impact.

The artist is the outsider, but it is the outsider who often brings new ideas, perspectives and tools that support new solutions and positive change. As societal, environmental and political issues become more extreme, artists and arts institutions are discovering that artistic skills, values and approaches can be effectively, flexibly and broadly engaged to serve community needs.

## QUESTIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

- ❓ How can we support long-term commitments to this work without direct revenue sources connected to these programs?
- ❓ What can we do to make learning from failure a more accepted and important practice in the field?
- ❓ Who should we be engaging with as partners, collaborators and community leaders around our audience building/community engagement work?
- ❓ What are the needs, issues and opportunities that most benefit from arts based solutions? How can we provide these tools more effectively across our communities to help create change and improve lives?

## PROJECT PROFILE



Photo credit: Desirae Lee

## Youth Speaks – Brave New Voices

Youth Speaks is a leading youth-centered nonprofit that facilitates spaces for young people to develop voice and power, building next generation leaders through poetry and spoken word performance. Based in San Francisco, Youth Speaks has built national impact and reach through engagement projects. Brave New Voices is an international field building strategy born from poetry slams, creating platforms to bring young people from around the world together to speak to the most pressing issues on their hearts and minds and develop a 'Future Corps' of youth leadership.

Youth Speaks defined success in part as nurturing the next generation of leadership in the arts and more broadly in American society. They believe that organizations that work with young people need to create spaces for their youth to engage in every way possible—artistically, organizationally and administratively. They have seeded a generation of young leaders around the country who have gone through their programs, which indicates great potential for future leadership. Brave New Voices attempted to establish and maintain a global movement of artists, activists and educators who advance social justice issues and issues of community-building in their work and art, and thus success is reflected in the number and depth of partnerships that support this goal.

[Check out the Youth Speaks case study](#) →

[Learn more about Youth Speaks](#) →

### ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has worked with five re-granting partners to support the exploration and implementation of new ideas in audience building and community engagement. Since 2001, the foundation has supported almost 60 rounds of funding in nine different funding programs. These programs, in addition to the foundation's own *Building Demand for the Arts*, include Dance/USA's *Engaging Dance Audiences*, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters' *Creative Campus* and later *Building Bridges*, National Performance Network's *Performance Residency Fund* (now *Artistic Engagement Fund*) and *Community Fund*, Theatre Communication Group's *Future Audiences* and later *Audience (R)Evolution* and EmcArts' *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*.

Through these programs, more than 300 projects have been supported involving more than 220 performing arts presenters, producers, universities and service organizations in thirty-five states and DC. The total financial investment in this work exceeds \$42 Million.

This series of articles shares the learning from this body of work and recognizes the considerable contributions of the foundation's grantmaking partners and the commitment and creativity of the artists and organizations who have continued to advance audience building and community engagement through initiatives undertaken with the support of these granting programs.



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