

# CYCLICAL MENTORSHIP IN ARTS EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

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**Insights from Emerging and Veteran Leaders**



**A CONVERSATION BETWEEN**

**JESS PEÑA AND LIBBY LAI-BUN CHIU**



**AMERICANS  
for the  
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 Division of Arts & Museums

## 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

## JESS PEÑA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FAIRBANKS ARTS ASSOCIATION

Jess Peña is a lifelong Alaskan and Executive Director at Fairbanks Arts Association, a 50 year-old local arts organization in Alaska's Interior.

Jess began work with Fairbanks Arts Association in 2012 as Education Coordinator, managing the organization's arts residency & performing arts programs that serve the school district's 14,000 students. In January of 2016, Ms. Peña became Fairbanks Arts Association's first new Executive Director in 20 years.

Jess is passionate about creating opportunities for arts engagement, arts education, and promoting the arts as an essential facet of community health. In her time with Fairbanks Arts, Jess has worked

with the FAA's affiliate member organizations, the tourism industry, the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce, and local and state government to drive this work forward. She currently serves on the Alaska Arts Education Advisory Committee of the Alaska State Council on the Arts, the Emerging Leaders Council of Americans for the Arts, and local committees dedicated to enhancing the economic and artistic vibrancy of the City of Fairbanks.



### Veteran Leader in Arts Education

## LIBBY LAI-BUN CHIU

ADJUNCT LECTURER, MASTER OF ARTS ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM,  
GOUCHER COLLEGE

Libby Chiu is an Adjunct Lecturer in the Goucher College Master of Arts Administration program, teaching three courses: International Arts Policy, Arts Education, and Grantsmanship. In 2015, Libby was appointed by Governor Mike Pence as a Commissioner of the Indiana Arts Commission.

Libby was most recently Chief of Staff at the Illinois Arts Council where she also managed the Arts and Foreign Language grants program, and was co-designer and project director of the Education Leaders Institute, an initiative of the National Endowment for the

Arts begun in 2007. Her past executive leadership service includes Urban Gateways Center for Arts Education, Harris Theater Chicago, The Boston Conservatory, Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, and Boston Public Schools. She was the co-founder and co-designer of Boston's first arts high school, the Boston Arts Academy. She designed and led the professional development series at Wayne Centre for the Arts in Wooster, Ohio.

She is a frequent speaker, facilitator and panelist for local and national agencies including many state arts agencies, the National Endowment for the Arts, Southeast Asian Women Conference and, Berklee College of Music City Music National Conference. She is active in community service for organizations including the Corporate Responsibility Group of Chicago, the Asians American and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, and the Boston Dragon Boat Festival Committee, the last since its founding in 1979. She was the first Chairman of the Boston Human Rights Commission.

Libby is bilingual in Chinese and English, and has over 30 years training in dance.

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



**LIBBY:** I'd love to jump in on this one. I have been in this field for decades and a few years ago, Daniel Windham, the Director of Arts at the Wallace Foundation in New York, said to me—and I paraphrase a bit here—“Libby, we should not call ourselves ‘Leaders’ anymore. Rather, we should call ourselves ‘Elders.’ The word “Leaders” and the role of leaders should now be passed on to the next generation because leaders tend to hold on too tightly and they tend to keep their positions. If we’re talking about the ‘future,’ we’ve got to let the ‘future’ take over.” And that was a really transformative moment for me, because, YES—we elders really do think that our way (because it’s tried and true) is the only way. And for arts education, that should never, ever be our position.



**JESS:** When I was thinking about these questions earlier, what I had jotted down was not necessarily a transformative moment that took place between myself and a mentor or a student, but was instead a validating experience that I had with one of my daughters—I’ll share that in a minute. But, first, I would like to build on what Libby said. I certainly have had a transformative experience that wasn’t so much a moment, but an on-going series of moments with my mentor who was the previous director of the organization I now lead. She was the director of our organization for twenty years—a long time. Libby’s statement of thinking about current leaders as elders can be a valuable perspective to take, but to do so, the leader has to be able to accept their responsibility as an ongoing advisory role, which my mentor did. She is an Inupiaq woman devoted to the Fairbanks community and its people. She very naturally took on this role as mentor who offered advice and guidance in various ways—often through stories about Fairbanks history and the organization. I believe experienced arts leaders thinking about themselves in an advisory role would be such an incredible asset to young leaders because you can take that valuable, historical knowledge and build on it or change it to whatever the contemporary circumstances are. So I just wanted to add that to what Libby said because I appreciated her comments.



**LIBBY:** Thank you!



**JESS:** What I had jotted down before—I have twin, preteen daughters who couldn’t be any more different in personality or interests. One day my husband and I were watching the Hamilton documentary on PBS while my artistic, history-loving, musical-loving daughter was away at a friend’s house; she LOVES Hamilton. My other daughter, who has very little interest in these things, was at home with us. She was off reading or brooding in a corner, I don’t know.

So, Winter (my Hamilton-loving daughter) gets home and is quite upset with us that we had been watching this documentary without her. And her twin sister, Aria, who does not have much interest in history or musicals, proceeded to basically go into the entire plot line complete with historically accurate facts and information. I was totally blown away and it was one of those transformative, validating moments as an arts educator. I was like 'YES! YES! Delivery of information through the arts!' A student who might not otherwise process this information from reading a textbook soaked it up so quickly through the addition of clever rhythms and melodies.

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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?



**JESS:** So again, I am a nonprofit leader, but in the public education system something that we are often battling against in the field is contending with hundreds of years of mystification surrounding the arts. This mystification makes it sort of easy for us to separate the concept of 'art' from other academic areas and therefore cut its funding as something that's nice but not absolutely necessary. And this, of course, cuts opportunity for employment and advancement in arts education. Even though there's a lot of research out there that shows the benefits of arts education and the positive effects it can have in other areas, the idea of what art is, is so engraved within our society. And so, I think one of the key ways to tackle this challenge, even though it's going to take a while, is to change the language we use surrounding the arts. Contending with hundreds of years of intentional elevation and mystification of the arts in Western society, that's going to be difficult to come back from. So I think moving toward core arts standards that are fully-inclusive of arts integration and culturally relevant material are going to be key. I think making sure educational settings have space for the presence of culture bearers, and other educators who haven't gone through the Western education system are going to be important. Really, just keeping the focus on the benefit to young people. From my perspective being here in Alaska, that mystification and the need for changing language around the arts are a big part of what's going on here.



**LIBBY:** I love Jess. Oh my gosh. Because what you just said segues into what I want to say. I think the biggest barrier is language, but in a different way. Jess is so eloquent about the language and content of arts education. I have another perspective about the language of arts education on how we paint the arts education field as being in a constant state of cut and slash... "It's a battlefield." While that is indeed true, I strongly suggest, as Jess said, that we change language. Let's enhance the language for the role of the arts education leader. Rather than being victims, paint us as fighters, paint us as warriors. Paint us as arts education leaders, because that is such an exciting role. And yes, I have to go back to the word "fighters."



It gives us such an exciting opportunity to change and improve education, rather than “saving” arts education. Leadership in arts education is not about saving, but pushing and promoting and resolving and evolving. (This is the way we describe leaders in every other field.) I think we haven’t been serving as a “leader” as much as we think we are “saviors.” My other suggestion is when we speak of “emerging leaders,” we need to work one generation further back before the Millennials. We can start coaching high school students who have had their piano lessons cut, or their dance lessons cancelled. Let’s start with them by saying, “Stop lamenting that we, as adults, have cut your arts program. Tell us what you want us to do, with you and for you. How about you come up with an idea?” High school students can be passionate advocates, so let’s start training earlier for emerging leadership and put three generations together: the ones receiving arts education, the emerging, such as Jess, and the elders. Put groups like this together, so someone like me, and someone like Daniel, can say to the younger generations, “It’s such fun being annoying, such fun being a thorn in people’s sides, such fun being agitators.” Make it exciting! No, agitating doesn’t pay anything, but think of what you can do. All of us want to be agitators. But think of the fun you can get from being annoying!

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



**LIBBY:** The one virtue is we would have more people to believe in and support the need for arts education. For example, I don’t feel that we have included educators of other subjects—I don’t feel we have included them enough. To broaden the leadership pipeline, we ought to include these educators. A high school chemistry teacher, for example. That broadens our scope of commitment.



**JESS:** I totally agree. In addition to the things that you said, a great benefit would be bringing in people who don’t see themselves as artists or educators, but who live more in that intersection of “Arts AND…” You know, arts AND science, arts AND math. I think it would be an incredible benefit to the students, and that person’s colleagues within the school—I mean that would be embedded professional development for other teachers. And it would also help raise the importance of a strong arts presence in a way that might resonate differently with folks.



**LIBBY:** I love that last statement, “in a way that might resonate differently.”



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



**JESS:** So, the one that I found that is so, so important to be successful in the field is communication. The ability to communicate the intention and value of the work to different kinds of audiences is so valuable. So Michael Rohd, who has been a facilitator for Americans for the Arts, gives an example where there are artists in the room trying to pitch this project to the Red Cross, and the Red Cross is totally open to collaborating with the artists, but it's like the artists are speaking a totally different language. Like they almost need a translator. I think, sometimes as artists, we do get excited about that work that we're doing, and it's all about creativity or the act of making, or the process or feeling like what we're doing should speak for itself, but that's a dangerous assumption to make. So cultivating those communication skills about what you do can have an incredibly long-lasting impact. Not just for the field through guiding others' understanding of the field, but also for one's personal growth through reflection of one's own practice or educational philosophy, teaching in and through the arts. We run arts education programs at my organization and I advocate on behalf of these programs regularly. I have to be able to communicate the benefits of what we do in a way that will reach the audiences I am speaking to, whether it's through numbers and stats, or pictures and stories, that communication is key.



**LIBBY:** I need Jess with me at all times. Really! I have my thoughts percolating, and when Jess speaks, I would think "perfect segue!" And your perfect segue this time was 'reach the different audiences.' For me, one of the ways reaching that takes years—decades of work—is to start volunteering when you are young, and try to cultivate as many people in as many different fields, as you possibly can, in your lifetime. I always tell people to volunteer in a field that has nothing to do with the arts, at least, not directly related to your field. For instance, I have volunteered in community organizing, in social work, in things that, ostensibly, have nothing to do with education. I now have an arsenal of people, so if someone tells me, "Libby, we really want to get into the health field. Can you get me somebody who would be interested in getting into arts and health?" I would rack my brain, and I remember I volunteered at a children's hospital. Sure enough, we would get murals painted, art therapy broadened, and so forth. It's going back to what Jess said: 'different audiences.' We need our young people to acquire knowledge and resources beyond arts education. I was directing the Educators Leaders Institute for NEA a few years back and state teams were formed as Institute participants. One state team asked me what kind of membership I'd like to have on their team. I replied, "Find me a police chief and a steel worker." Sure enough, that's what they recruited. The police chief was amazing. He said, "I deal with young people all the time. I have to deal with young people all the time because I don't want them to grow up to be criminals." He ran a tennis club on his own time

and as a volunteer. The perspective the police chief lent to the discussion of arts education was stunning, and the same for the steel worker. I found out about aesthetics in ironwork and then did some more research on it. I didn't know that the National Ironworkers Union has a decorative ironworks competition for high school students. You just never know! The skill here is for the emerging leader is to get yourself involved with non-arts fields, as well as people. And the long-lasting impact is that, again, going back to Jess' comment, you learn what language to use with the steel workers, versus the police chief, versus the political activist, versus a social worker, versus a doctor. Just acquire those skills of language without compromising.

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## **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?



**LIBBY:** Remember your kindergarten experience. It's a natural arts education experience. Everybody knows that, but many forget that. Where the arts are so completely integral to everything you learn there. Remember the book "Everything You Need to Know You Learned in Kindergarten"? I strongly suggest reading it. Other advice, which is to know when to be humble and when to be arrogant. We believe arts is about expression, or in education we're learners, or teachers. Well, sometimes, you need to be arrogant the way a politician strikes us as being. By arrogant, I don't mean it in the negative sense where you're treading on people, but arrogant meaning you're so firm. Not just confident, but firm, not just demanding—"YOU LISTEN TO ME!"—well, you know, I get a little carried away! Oh gosh, I'm going to get kicked out. I teach courses at Goucher College, and I start every class with "I'm going to turn you into arrogant young people." Terrible! Anyway, it's a balance between humility and arrogance. There is a quality of duality. Can you see me teaching a professional development workshop for emerging leaders and saying "OK, go ahead and be arrogant." HA!



**JESS:** First of all, be confident and resilient in the work that you're doing. I think while art for art's sake is wonderful and has a place, arts education has the power to unlock new perspectives of understanding and abilities for a young person in so many more areas than just art. Which is a big, beautiful, and sometimes complex responsibility. I think many of us want to see the arts woven into our educational system in a way that can't be frayed, so find the connections between what you do and other areas and become an effective weaver. So I guess my advice is: Be a weaver!



**LIBBY:** A weaver. I love that! May I add one more thing, please? When you work in advocacy for people to learn about arts education, don't take them to a performance. Take them to a class. Let's say Joffrey Ballet: I once took a group of potential donors to a professional ballet company's lesson—they weren't even doing a rehearsal, it was just a regular ballet class. And what my guests

were watching is the dirty side of ballet. Not the beautiful side with the white tutus and so forth, but the grunge. They're in tights and torn tee shirts. I want my guests to know and remember that ballet is not frou-frou. Ballet is hard work. Joe Namath took ballet lessons to develop flexibility to play football. I always use that in my advocacy work because everybody knows Namath. Well, you might be too young a generation, so I don't know if you do. But it can be another kind of famous professional athlete. Seriously though, many professional athletes have a lot of respect for ballet, commenting "We don't know how they can do it." So, my final piece of advice for emerging leaders in advocacy is: Take them to the lessons. Show them the hard work. So future leaders, do not just make arts pretty. Show the strenuous side of the arts. Show them the feet that come from a ballet career.



**JESS:** I like that Libby. Thank you for sharing that.

## Q: What is your hope for the future of leadership in arts education?



**JESS:** My hope for the future of arts education leadership is that we transform the field in such a way that arts educators are leaned on more often as the effective forces they are. And, in addition to studio art, theatre, dance, and music positions, that arts integration specialists will be embedded in the school environment to better realize the potential of all students. I want to see our educational system embrace the core value of learning in and through the arts, with arts education leadership being at the center of that initiative.



**LIBBY:** I see Jess as being one of our bright hopes. However you can't tell my husband because he'll be at your doorstep immediately because he loves Alaska.



**JESS:** Well, you guys should come visit!



**LIBBY:** My hope for leadership is that we must not be—and I know it's coming from a negative point—we cannot think the arts are the end-all be-all in our furor to promote arts leadership. We must remember that as arts education leaders, we tend to forget the education part which is curriculum, assessment, a lot of pedagogy. We often confuse arts education as only "the practice of arts." I'm always proud to say that I was a K-12 educator: I was a teacher and I was a principal. I was also formally trained in ballet. We've got to remember that both sides, arts and education, as a field, must have equal importance. We cannot forget the education part.



**JESS:** I totally agree. I think the idea of not having arts be the end-all is so important. I talk a lot about the necessity of arts integration and arts leadership embracing a more art-integrated approach. I believe that artists, as creative people, can really be those connections that exist between one thing and another, and so artists can play a really important role in making the connections between creative practice and the sciences, engineering, etc. Having the focus on education and what is best for the student is really important. So thank you for saying that Libby.



**LIBBY:** I have a degree in education, and while growing up, I also took the Royal Academy of Dance ballet exams, so I am certified in both arts and education. While I know that piece of paper may not mean much to some people, we nonetheless really have to convince people that we are formally trained. That we didn't just "fall" into arts education because we think students should just know about the arts. If you don't know pedagogy, I'm sorry, you aren't going to be taken seriously as an educator in arts or any other subject. I really love how the field is becoming more and more formalized in arts education, with the word education taking as much importance as arts. I don't think everybody can have the wonderful dual experience I had, but we have to make it a priority to push it. It's not just "I'm a dancer but I'm going to jump into education." To educators, it is rather insulting. "Why claim that when you didn't study pedagogy?" My strong belief for the future of arts education is to make sure that we study both words—arts and education—deeply.

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