

Strategies to Achieve Equitable Investment by Local Arts Agencies and Nexus Organizations

Cultural equity is critical to the arts and culture sector’s long-term viability, as well as to the ability of the arts to contribute to healthy, vibrant, equitable communities for all. To achieve fair and equitable distribution of resources within the cultural sector of each community, it is important to ensure that all types of investment made by local arts agencies and nexus organizations adhere to core practices and competencies that

- *center equity and address bias,*
- *honor and embrace the inherent knowledge of their communities and constituents,*
- *invest in a strong, broad leadership pipeline,*
- *support the fullest range of arts, cultural, and creative expression, and*
- *embrace new models of power-sharing and decision-making.*

INTRODUCTION

According to the Americans for the Arts Local Arts Agency Profile, each year the United States’ 4,500 local arts agencies¹ (LAAs) and nexus organizations² collectively invest³ an estimated \$2.8 billion in their local ecosystems. This includes an estimated \$600 million in direct investment in artists and arts and culture organizations through grants, contracts, and loans. This investment has grown steadily since the founding of the local arts movement 60 years ago. For comparison, according to Helicon Collaborative’s *Not Just Money*, all of private philanthropy invests approximately \$4 billion annually to the arts, and according to Giving USA’s 2017 report, corporations give about \$950 million annually to the arts.

This makes LAAs, collectively, the largest distributor of publicly-derived funds to arts and culture and one of the largest and steadiest underwriters of artists and creative workers in the United States. LAAs must employ a strong lens of equity⁴ in their investments through grantmaking and beyond.

Existing systems of power grant privilege and access unequally. At this moment and in this sociopolitical climate these inequities are more visible even as they are more untenable.

¹ **Local Arts Agencies (LAAs)**, of which there are 4,500 in the United States, promote, support, and develop the arts at the local level ensuring a vital presence for the arts throughout America’s communities. LAAs are diverse in their makeup—they have many different names and embrace a spectrum of artistic disciplines—but each works to sustain the health and vitality of the arts and artists locally and to make the arts accessible to all members of a community. Each LAA in America is unique to the community that it serves, and each evolves within its community.

² **Nexus organizations** sit at the intersection between the various components of a community—the community members, the public sector, the private sector, the educational institutions, the creative workers, and the arts organizations—and facilitate the role of arts, culture, and creativity in making those communities healthier, more vibrant, more equitable places. These organizations can take a variety of forms. The most prevalent is the local arts agency, but they can also be state arts agencies, educational institutions, community or youth development organizations, arts service organizations, community foundations, non-arts government agencies, presenting or producing institutions, churches, union halls, or something else entirely. The unifying factor is that these organizations sit at the intersection of arts, culture, and community life.

³ **Investment** is the allocation of a resource (money, time, space) in the expectation that it will yield a future benefit. “Equitable investment” is the centering of cultural equity in investment strategies, in particular the recognition and restructuring of inequitable systems of consideration, allocation, distribution, and evaluation in terms of such investments.

⁴ **Cultural equity** embodies the values, policies, and practices that ensure that all people—including but not limited to those who have been historically, and continued to be, underrepresented based on race/ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, or religion—are represented in the development of arts policy; the support of artists; the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for expression; and the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources. While intersectionality is real and crucial to providing entry for people at various stages of readiness, we acknowledge that racial inequity is central to most societal issues, particularly when it comes to the distribution of resources.

Service and funding organizations, such as Americans for the Arts, that support LAAs and nexus organizations must encourage a thoughtful, quick, and decisive transition of inequitable investment policies and practices toward equity. In the short-term, this means propelling shifts *now* in the nature and structure of LAA investment programs, policies, and practices. In the longer-term, this means supporting and driving root transformation in the systems and structures that undergird LAA investments in the community and cultural ecosystem, transforming the minds and hearts of those who currently control and impact such investment strategies; and training and establishing a more diverse and representative set of leaders among those who make decisions and set policies.

In partnership with a field-based advisory group, Americans for the Arts proposes four goals that, if achieved, would support meaningful, measurable progress toward the fair and equitable distribution of all types of LAA investments, as well as specific strategies to achieve those goals. Together these goals address the need to change the conditions and culture in the agencies stewarding cultural investment resources, while also providing immediate and proximate support for people leading the change. The goals and associated strategies listed here and detailed below are interrelated and synergistic. Multiple prongs of effort need to be implemented concurrently and strategically staged.

While this document guides rather than dictating specific next steps, Americans for the Arts and our various partners are actively moving on the recommendations in this document and developing new bodies of work around national communities of practice, leadership pipeline, and the education and transformation of existing leadership in the field.

GOALS AND STRATEGIES

The broad centering of equity in how the local arts field invests in artists, arts organizations, and communities, aligns around four main goals.

- **GOAL 1: SUPPORT FOR DIVERSE LEADERSHIP (CURRENT AND FUTURE)**
Local standard bearers and champions in the movement for cultural equity, as well as a rising class of future arts leaders from the full demographic spectrum, are connected and supported to maintain motivation to drive change. In the long-term, the demographics of those in power must mirror those of the community.
- **GOAL 2: EDUCATED AND TRANSFORMED DECISION MAKERS**
Decision makers with the power to direct cultural investments use and equity lens to implement or strengthen equitable policies, programs and practices and support equity changemakers in their agencies and in the cultural ecosystem. In the long-term, all in power, including a broader group reflective of the full demographics of the community, are equipped to drive and support equity.
- **GOAL 3: A STRONG BODY OF EVIDENCE-BASED EQUITABLE INVESTMENT PRACTICES**
Effective and innovative evidence-based equitable investment practices proliferate from community to community, supported by quality, accessible research, documentation, and evaluation, a national support network, and communities of shared learning/practice.

➤ **GOAL 4: SECTOR-WIDE COLLECTIVE ACTION TO ADDRESS EQUITY**

Collaboration and communication among the national service organizations expands the reach, improves the efficiency of field education for cultural equity and accelerates adoption of equitable policies and practices.

RATIONALE

The pursuit of equitable investment in the local arts field must combine relatively short-term interventions with longer-term systemic shifts.

Current standard bearers and equity champions need opportunities for support, connection, and exchange with peers and experts. Being the only, or one of a few, advocates for equity-based systemic change within an organization—often without the expertise, resources or authority necessary to accomplish the shift needed—can be a substantial challenge. Personal and community expectations for change can weigh heavily. Concurrent feelings of urgency, responsibility and isolation can lead to frustration, resentment and/or burn-out.

Meanwhile, for most local arts agencies, a significant amount of positional and structural power is situated in their boards or commissions and with authorizing agencies and influential donors of dominant cultural organizations that LAA serves. Demographic diversification for LAA boards and commissions lags behind community demographic change. Research from Americans for the Arts indicates that boards/commission, on average, are 12 percent whiter, 16 years older, 49 percent more liberal, and 14 percent more able-bodied than the general U.S. population.

Demographic shift among staff members (including senior leaders), board members, and commissioners is necessary to long-term systems change. Until the people with the power to make decisions about investments look like the full breadth of the community impacted by those investments, the system will continue to be inequitable and subject to the conscious and unconscious biases of the individuals in power. That said, such shift will be incremental and will occur over time.

While the demographics of most communities are changing, the influence of the rising demographic groups doesn't increase in proportion to their size. These groups don't, and for some time still, *won't* have the same power, wealth, and clout as entrenched, mostly white and wealthy, individuals. Currently in the local arts agency field, 73 percent of the total dollars distributed through grants, contracts, and loans each year goes to the top 16 percent of arts organizations. Disrupting this imbalance requires, in the short term, more communications frames to get more people to be part of the solution, and in the long term, a different set of people with different demographics at the helm.

Messaging, data, and training are needed to raise awareness of positional power, privilege, and bias, both explicit and implicit and how these factors affect the decision-making process and distribution policies and practices. Critical but tricky is how to communicate value and opportunity; realigning towards equity isn't as much about a shift in "how it has always been" but rather a vital course-correction that will benefit the entire community. While important to frame equity in ways that resonate with value systems of those currently in power, when the rhetoric swings too heavily away from historical injustice and reconciliation there is a danger of undermining and re-traumatizing traumatized populations. Education of

these individuals is a key component of the process and must be repeated as new members enter their positions. In addition, resistance or reticence on the part of long-term senior staff members can stymie organizational transformation or dishearten advocates for change within the organization.

The process of re-education, systems change, and innovation of practice is one that requires new skills, nationally-coordinated learning opportunities and communities of practice, shared learning, and support, and a strong base of evidence-based equitable investment practices from which to draw. Among many constantly competing priorities, it can be challenging to experiment and innovate—and can be even more challenging to do so in a way that allows for documentation, evaluation, and replication in other communities. By supporting better mechanisms for disseminating good practice, proliferating more detailed examples and how-to resources, and connecting communities, the national arts and culture community can help increase the number of evaluated, articulated models ready to adapt or adopt.

To transform core (upstream) LAA values and systems so that the whole system is working toward equitable objectives, LAA staff, as well as their boards and commissions, need the time and space to tackle the basic architecture and objectives of the system itself—including how culture is defined, and mechanisms such as cultural planning, asset mapping, and impact evaluation. These can themselves be fraught with implicit and/or unrecognized bias. Highlighting those biases, and providing alternative examples of practice, can begin to shift the underlying structures towards equity.

LAAs, and everyone else working in the arts and culture field, also need a set of local, state, and national networks to rely on. Currently, the various national service organizations have education, training, tools and field change initiatives that are developed with a common general purpose, but without significant coordination. Partnering around a subset of objectives related to equity, could move the field farther and faster toward adoption of equitable policies and practices.

All parts of the cultural support system, from LAAs and nexus organizations to national service organizations, need to better understand the current state of grantmaking and other investment, hiring, decision-making, etc. With more national and community-by-community comparable data on local investment strategies—types of investment, how and when they are made, where the funds and services are directed, who benefits, who is left out—and developing skills in the field to understand and translate data into stories, we can develop informed analysis, and strategies for case making change.

Since systems generally function as they were originally designed at their core, the core must be addressed for systemic change to occur. In the United States, beliefs and assumptions have been constructed to assign power and resources that benefit and value a dominant normative (white, male, heterosexual, wealthy, etc.) and disadvantage or actively harm the “other.” This ideological worldview permeates our history, economic strategies, and institutional systems, and it must be examined, altered or dismantled for any progress to be made towards equity. Right now, the default system of investment for most LAAs—like most systems of investment in the United States—is not designed with equity as the objective. Without addressing the deep, core, upstream origins of inequity, strategies implemented for change may be of limited impact.

This constant dialogue of downstream, immediate steps and upstream, longer-term systemic changes, we believe, can begin to both immediately address existing inequities and transform the system so that we as a field can move from triaging a broken system to existing within one that is more just, equitable, and representative of the full potential of the arts in community life.

STRATEGIES

In pursuit of these four goals, we propose the following five strategies.

1. **COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND SHARED LEARNING.**

Create new or promote existing communities of practice and peer convening opportunities for committed leaders to build bonds and trust, learn and grow through deep exchange, develop shared language, reflect, iterate ideas, and develop strategies for moving work forward.

2. **PIPELINE AND PRE/EARLY-PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL OPENNESS.**

Develop mechanisms for supporting, encouraging, and increasing opportunity for future arts leaders from the full demographic spectrum entering the field and progressing through early- and mid-career; ensure readiness and openness of the organizations into which they go; and lay the groundwork for a substantial long-term shift in the demographics of those making decisions, particularly about hiring, investment, and program development and delivery.

3. **AFFORDABLE/AVAILABLE HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING.**

Provide affordability and ease of access to high quality training, toolkits, support materials, etc., to LAA professionals at all career stages, trustees and commissioners in the following critical areas:

- a. anti-racism/anti-bias, power dynamics, and privilege
- b. authentic community engagement, empowerment, and input gathering
- c. how systems work and persist, and the levers that need to be pulled to transform them
- d. culture change and supporting/being part of positive/productive disruption
- e. diverse ways of communicating about, and encouraging participation in, equity initiatives
- f. data competency, data-based storytelling, and evaluation

4. **RESEARCH-BACKED TOOLS FOR DOING THE WORK.**

Identify or develop tools to support self-assessment, benchmarking, and evaluation over time, including:

- a. Easy-to-use data gathering and analysis platforms for local assessment and with the ability to aggregate data and do cross-community comparisons
- b. A self-assessment rubric for LAAs to assess how well internal systems and programs are achieving equity/community goals and progress over time, as well as tools for LAAs to then use to address identified areas of improvement
- c. Public opinion polling, national survey-based longitudinal data-gathering, and clearinghouses of germane field research and argumentation, identify and shape effective equity messaging that compels positional leaders to engage, learn and lead.

5. **A NATIONAL SUPPORT NETWORK FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT**

Establish a regular convening of point people within the national service organizations who are responsible for their equity-related work, develop a “field scan” to map existing equity-related efforts, and develop common goals that can be carried into independent and collaborative work.

AUTHORS, ADVISORS, AND SUPPORT

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