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# The Role of Philanthropy in Advancing Equity in the Arts

by Kerry McCarthy & Maurine Knighton October 7, 2019

By expanding support to arts and cultural organizations in diverse neighborhoods, funders can provide a missing ingredient in the effort to advance equity.

Those of us in philanthropy aren't typically in the business of making predictions. But we've been around the theater world long enough to expect that the Broadway musical *Soul Train* will be a hit when it debuts in 2021. The musical tells the story of the eponymous, landmark music and dance television program that helped shape black culture in America for decades.

What really sets *Soul Train* apart from other hit musicals, however, is the team of women staging it, all of whom had the opportunity to develop their talents through diverse local arts and cultural organizations. Writer Dominique Morrisseau, a MacArthur genius, produced some of her early work at the Classical Theatre of Harlem and the National Black Theatre. Choreographer Camille A. Brown, a Tony-award nominee, runs her own dance company in Queens and has been touring the nonprofit circuit for years. And director Kamilah Forbes ran Hi-Arts in East Harlem before becoming executive producer at the iconic Apollo Theater.

Organizations like these can serve as powerful incubators of diverse talent, but the kind of success stories Morrisseau, Brown, and Forbes represent are rarer than they should be. A 2017 study titled "Not Just Money: Equity Issues in Cultural Philanthropy," found that just two percent of all cultural institutions in the United States receive nearly 60 percent of all contributed revenue—a five percent higher share of revenue than the previous decade.

Even as *Soul Train* prepares to take flight, inequity in arts funding recently took center stage in New York, in the wake of a public plea by the operators of a vital African-American landmark and cultural center, Brooklyn's [Weeksville Heritage Center](#). Weeksville is a historically significant site within one of America's first free, black communities, and today it offers programming for public-school students and is a touchpoint for African-American artists. Despite its cultural significance, Weeksville was on the verge of closing its doors in spring 2019 because of a dire funding shortage. It took an emergency crowdfunding campaign for it to remain open. Following a public show of support that raised more than \$250,000 and generated significant local news coverage, Weeksville was able to get a long-needed designation from New York's Department of Cultural Affairs. The designation will ensure it receives public funding to continue providing cultural programming to New Yorkers.



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## Community Health Through Arts and Culture

Weeksville managed to avert financial collapse, but scores of other venues that incubate and showcase artists of color and connect with diverse audiences in New York and around the United States need help. These organizations may not receive as much foundation funding or private support as those that have more traditionally appealed to white audiences, but they play an equally important role in the health and vibrancy of communities, and thus deserve greater philanthropic attention and support.

The [Billie Holiday Theatre](#) in central Brooklyn, for example, has been carrying the banner of the Black Arts Movement and nurturing the artistic talents of performers like Samuel L. Jackson and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage for nearly 50 years. Amerinda Inc. has meanwhile supported Native American artists of all disciplines since 1987; documented New York's Contemporary Native American Arts Movement; and supported the nation's current poet laureate, Joy Harjo, during her early career.

When we invest in organizations like these, we're helping remove inequities that have an often unseen, yet profound, impact on our society—inequities that run much deeper than the organizations themselves. Culture, after all, is an important force in advancing social change. In the 1980s and 1990s, theater productions and movies such as *The Normal Heart*, *Rent*, *Angels in America*, and *Philadelphia* put a human face on AIDS and, in turn, the LGBTQ community. More recently, *Hamilton* has helped blow open the doors of Broadway by demonstrating that diverse artists and stories attract diverse audiences and can be profitable—very profitable.

Research also points to the fact that investment in the arts contributes to educational outcomes and overall civic health. [A 2019 study by the Brookings Institution](#) at public schools in Houston, for example, found that a cohort of students who received greater access to arts educational experiences saw remarkable improvements in academic, social, and emotional outcomes. This group of students received fewer disciplinary infractions, saw a significant improvement in standardized writing scores, and showed more compassion for others.

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## Funding Arts and Culture at the Local Level

It's time for cultural philanthropy to get more creative. Encouraged by national organizations such as Grantmakers in the Arts, which is actively working to provide funders with new research, resources, and best practices, a small-but-growing number of funders are working with arts and culture organizations and individual donors to address inequities at the community level in creative, systemic ways.

Here's a look at three steps funders can take to drive change toward more inclusive arts philanthropy, along with some examples from the field:

### 1. Commit to Achieving Clear, Concrete Goals

It's not enough to say you want to become more equitable. To make progress, arts funders must set explicit goals and develop concrete plans for improving their policies and practices. By setting goals around equity and inclusion, organizations maintain accountability and establish a shared understanding of what they seek to accomplish. Think about how you want to serve artists on the stage and in the galleries, help grantees better serve the entire constellation of artists and audiences, and improve the arts ecosystem as a whole.

In 2017, fellow funder Chamber Music America (CMA) worked with a facilitator to establish [eight specific goals](#) related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The organization then created a corresponding set of metrics to track and publicly report progress. For example, it achieved its goal of increasing the racial diversity of its membership by adding at least 50 new African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, and Native American (ALAANA) members. Similarly, CMA established a threshold of having ALAANA individuals compose at least 50 percent of its board. By reaching these outcomes, the organization believes it will be better equipped to provide equitable programming.

## 2. Engage Fellow Funders and Individual Donors

Donors are most likely to give to an organization when they have a personal connection to its work. Many wealthy donors support big-name arts and culture organizations because they are more familiar with these organizations. By exposing them to organizations outside of their normal networks, existing funders can help expand the circle of arts and culture groups that earn their support.

The Mosaic Network and Fund in The New York Community Trust, a consortium of New York City-based arts funders and local arts organization leaders, is working together to increase funding to ALAANA groups and support shared learning about the issues and challenges that face many organizations of color. An important part of this effort involves creating structured opportunities to connect funders and donors with ALAANA arts practitioners through a series of learning exchanges. This has led to a greater understanding among funders of the unique challenges facing ALAANA arts and culture organizations in New York City, as well as to the launch of a new program that provides multi-year, flexible grants to support work at these organizations.

## 3. Commit to Collaborative Action

As with any social issue, funders are more likely to achieve large-scale change if they share knowledge, pool financial resources, and speak with a united voice. Among arts and culture funders, long bound by tradition, collective action is particularly necessary. Collective action can help program officers and boards gain broader exposure to ALAANA arts organizations in their communities and expand the pool of financial resources.

Arts-focused collaborations are starting to take bloom in areas such as Minnesota, Chicago, Houston, and Seattle. In Minnesota, for example, a group of local foundations, including the McKnight Foundation and the Jerome Foundation, joined forces in 2013 to create the Racial Equity Funders Collaborative. The collaborative started as a group for funders to learn and share knowledge, identify racial inequity in their arts-and-culture grantmaking policies and practices, and advance racial equity in arts philanthropy in the Twin Cities. Today, foundation partners, including the Bush Foundation, are working in partnership with the Propel Nonprofits to provide working capital loans, financial management assistance, and access to infrastructure grants to help arts and culture organizations that serve people of color and other marginalized communities in the region.

The Racial Equity Funders Collaborative has also stepped forward to provide support to efforts like the [Twin Cities Theatres of Color Coalition](#). The effort was created in 2014 when five theaters—Penumbra Theatre, Mu Performing Arts, New Native Theater, Teatro del Pueblo, and Pangea World Theater—joined together to build knowledge and capacity and act on challenges and opportunities that arise as American theater diversifies. Collaborations like these bolster responsible and accountable engagement and generate new ways to direct more funding to neighborhood arts organizations, support new artists, and show young people from all backgrounds that it is possible to become a ballet dancer, a sculptor, a bassoon player.

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Equity in the arts is an important missing ingredient in the larger social effort to increase equity. The good news is local arts and cultural institutions have the power to help drive equity and inclusion within and across communities by incubating diverse talent; illuminating unseen social issues; and improving civic vibrancy, health, and educational outcomes. It's time for philanthropy to get creative and correct the historical unfairness of arts funding. It should strive to do so with humility and in partnership with others, seeking out the perspectives of the people it hopes to benefit and establishing meaningful relationships. From there, cultural philanthropy can develop and implement plans to ensure that efforts are creating more opportunities for talented artists of color—so that the *Soul Train* dream team isn't a one-off. By creating more opportunity for diverse artists on and off Broadway, audiences and communities will win.

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