

Emerging Lessons and Implications from the Exploring Engagement Fund



Highlights from a Harder+Company Community Research interim report on the first phase of the Exploring Engagement Fund (2012-2013).

Introduction

Through its Exploring Engagement Fund, The James Irvine Foundation provides risk capital for California arts organizations with innovative ideas and a readiness to take bold steps that will engage new and diverse populations.

This report, drawn from an assessment by independent consulting firm Harder+Company Community Research in close partnership with consultant Diane Espaldon, distills lessons from the early implementation of Exploring Engagement Fund projects. The first phase of the Fund featured five rounds of grantmaking. This report is based on information from three of these rounds; it covers the first year in a series of two-year grants. It is drawn from analysis of grantee reports and interviews, and offers seven lessons as well as practical tips that can benefit arts organizations working to engage new and diverse participants.

Early results demonstrate that grantee strategies have encouraged new participants to experience, learn about and develop interest in the arts. Grantee organizations are testing their approaches to engagement of participants from communities of color and low-income groups — two populations of particular interest to The James Irvine Foundation. Preliminary data suggests that their strategies, in aggregate, are successful.

The Exploring Engagement Fund supports experimentation and pilot projects by arts nonprofits. Learn more at irvine.org/EEF.

Irvine is launching a second phase of Exploring Engagement Fund grantmaking in 2014. This new grantmaking is informed by lessons included in this report.

About the Irvine Arts Strategy

The Exploring Engagement Fund is part of The James Irvine Foundation Arts program, which aims to promote engagement in the arts for all Californians. The Foundation has three priorities for achieving this goal.

- **Strengthening:** Help arts organizations adapt to change by moving engagement to the core of who they are and what they do.
- **Piloting:** Provide risk capital to test new ways of engaging audiences and participants, and to encourage experimentation and innovation across the field.
- **Field-Building:** Develop a field of leaders and organizations working together to expand engagement so the arts — and arts organizations — are indispensable in people's lives.

The Exploring Engagement Fund is the primary vehicle for advancing the "Piloting" priority of the Irvine Arts strategy.

Exploring Engagement Fund to Date

To date, Irvine has made 91 Exploring Engagement Fund grants across California; total investment is \$15,573,000. The 52 grantees represented in this report received funding between June and December 2012. Grantees spanned a range of disciplines, including those mainly focused on visual arts (33 percent), on performing arts (44 percent) and on both visual and performing arts (15 percent).

One year into implementing their projects (most received two-year grants), grantees reported that they had conducted 1,417 events, ranging from one to 261 events per grantee. A total of 127,074 people participated in all of the events across the 52 grantee organizations. In line with the intent of the Exploring Engagement Fund, these organizations reported reaching low-income and ethnically diverse participants. The majority of events, 60 percent, were attended primarily by communities of color (meaning that 70 to 100 percent of total event participants were non-white); while 43 percent were attended primarily by low-income participants.

Exploring Engagement: Here's What We Are Learning

Highlights from a Harder+Company Community Research interim report on the first phase of the Exploring Engagement Fund (2012-2013).

	Lesson	Practical Tip
Invest Time	 <p>True engagement with new and diverse populations takes time, patience and commitment</p>	Plan long timeframes and expect adjustments
Build Trust	 <p>Getting to know a community and building trust are vital to planning and implementing arts engagement</p>	Engage community members and join their events
Partner Well	 <p>Community partners are critical to accessing new and diverse participants</p>	Work with well-regarded, active local organizations
Relate, Don't Sell	 <p>Engaging new and diverse participants requires different marketing and outreach</p>	Market via community relationships
Go to New Places	 <p>Non-arts venues can help reach new and diverse participants, and often bring unique challenges</p>	Make the effort to use locations familiar to participants
Try New Approaches	 <p>New methods and styles can reach participants who perceive art as "not for me"</p>	Encourage active participation and co-creation
Align Your Team	 <p>Engagement calls for diverse capabilities, training and practices for artists and staff</p>	Choose your team thoughtfully

Invest Time



Lesson #1:

True engagement with new and diverse populations takes time, patience and commitment

Grantees needed more time than initially expected to assess community interest, create buy-in and trust, and design their projects well. With population groups historically underserved by arts nonprofits, they encountered mistrust and skepticism, language barriers, little connection to the arts and hesitation by residents to leave their own neighborhoods. Several grantees had to overcome negative perceptions of their organizations' previous history in a community.

These organizations found that successful arts engagement was fueled by organizing constituent focus groups, forming community advisory committees, building community partnerships, and connecting with community liaisons and volunteers. However, these activities required more staff time and attention than many grantees anticipated. Plus, grantees that set up programming in places not typically used for art had to secure permits to operate in public places, deal with municipalities and government agencies, find local staff or volunteers, and build physical infrastructure to deliver programs.

Practical Tip



Plan long timeframes and expect adjustments

Being responsive to the community means longer schedules and often unexpected expenses. Build flexibility into the timeline and budget, and be ready to make project adjustments along the way.

Build Trust



Lesson #2:

Getting to know a community and building trust are vital to planning and implementing arts engagement

Grantees found that one of the most effective ways to build trust and relationships is to have a consistent presence at community events, with leaders personally interacting and connecting with community members.

Not knowing a community well enough caused problems. For example, one grantee engaged musicians whose songs reflected a region different from the home region its target population came from, leading to audience dissatisfaction. Another planned to engage participants through social media, email, and cell phone communications, but “our intended audience doesn’t own the technology to participate in that way, and if they do, they limit contact information and usage to family and friends.” Some reported poor attendance at events scheduled at the same time as major high school football games, recitals, school breaks, concerts and other events highly valued by the community.

To grow community knowledge and relationships prior to implementing their projects, grantees used community meetings, workshops, focus groups, advisory teams and collaboration with community-based organizations to inform or co-design programming and outreach. Grantees were rewarded for their efforts. They gained constituents, demand and appreciation for their programming, and community support for their organizations — plus enthusiasm and a greater sense of community connectedness among their staff.

Practical Tips



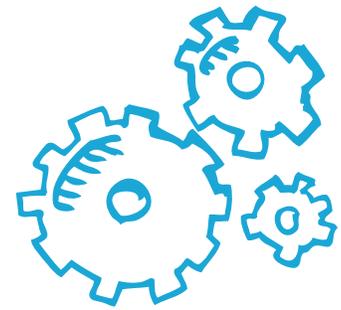
Engage community members

Ensuring community participation from the beginning leads to more informed and authentic artistic choices. It provides greater context that can improve success and builds relationships, trust, buy-in, access and credibility.

Join community events

Understanding the “lay of the land” in a community and developing a consistent presence are central to building trust. Attend and participate in community and partner events, share the resources of your organization (e.g., use of your space, tickets to events or exhibits, technical assistance), be transparent about your engagement goals and purpose, and demonstrate commitment to what the community says it needs and wants — moving beyond what your organization *perceives* that the community needs and wants.

Partner Well



Lesson #3:

Community partners are critical to accessing new and diverse participants

Grantees cited community partners as one of the most important factors in the success — and one of the greatest lasting benefits — of their projects. They engaged a variety of partners, from the expected such as social service organizations, community centers, government agencies, educational institutions, libraries and churches, to the unexpected such as a skate shop, a bar, local farms and an anarchist sewing collective.

Most grantees did not start their engagement work with these relationships fully developed. They had to learn that their own interest in reaching low-income groups and communities of color was not sufficient to ensure the participation of needed partners. Yet the involvement of these partners was essential to the hard work of building credibility with new participants.

It takes time to find partners who can be relied on to open doors, and to build trust with these partners. Arts organizations must demonstrate that they respect the work and role of each partner. In building these relationships, many arts organizations learned to relinquish some control of the participant experience to partners in exchange for the increased access that partnerships provide.

Most grantees want to continue their partner relationships. Community partners have provided input and guidance on project design, access to target participants, marketing support and facilities. They have helped grantees gain credibility and a deeper reach into communities.

Practical Tip



Work with well-regarded, active local organizations

Join with community partners that are knowledgeable about, and connected to, the population you seek to engage. Don't start with a fixed, pre-conceived plan; assume your partners' needs and interests are as important to the project as your own. Establish common commitment, shared expectations, goals and values, then create a written agreement (e.g., a Memorandum of Understanding). Build in time to develop the relationship. Assume you will have less control than usual. Be adaptable in the process; expect unanticipated changes and challenges based on your partners' organizational dynamics, capacity issues or lack of familiarity with arts organizations or the arts in general.

Relate, Don't Sell



Lesson #4:

Engaging new and diverse participants requires different marketing and outreach

Many grantees learned that the usual ways they “get the word out” are not right for engaging new and diverse arts participants. With the guidance of community partners, or through their own hard-earned lessons, grantees started to use marketing and public relations efforts that are more grassroots, community-focused and relationship-based.

In addition to or instead of traditional strategies, grantees successfully marketed through word-of-mouth, laundromats, employee staff rooms, local stores, ethnic groceries, community media, radio interviews and social media. One grantee reported, “We are adjusting our communications approach from mass marketing to a system of individuals talking to their friends and found that the community prefers and responds best to face-to-face interaction when possible. We have learned to question not only electronic messaging methods, but also terminology, vocabulary and tone.”

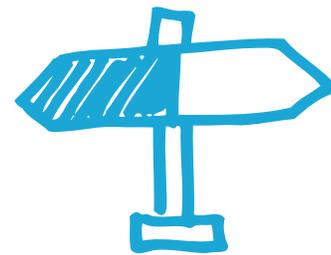
Practical Tip



Market via community relationships

Face-to-face interactions, credible community partners and liaisons, social media, local news media such as community blogs and radio, and physical presence at neighborhood events are the most effective methods of outreach to new and diverse arts participants.

Go to New Places



Lesson #5:

Non-arts venues can help reach new and diverse participants, and often bring unique challenges

Grantees found that it is easier to reach underserved populations when arts activities take place in community settings and locations where these participants normally gather. Venues that grantees used included spaces within local community organizations, public parks, a sports arena, parking lots and an area where restaurant industry workers gather after their shifts.

Because these venues are not set up for art-making, performances or exhibitions, planning for complex logistics required that arts organizations be flexible and ready to troubleshoot. In a few cases, grantees were frustrated with venue staffers who did not share their values or believe in their project. As one grantee noted, "The venue had no commitment or buy-in. They did not see the value in the event." Most grantees using a non-traditional venue made the best of it, however, and many felt this step was critical to accessing the participants they sought to reach.

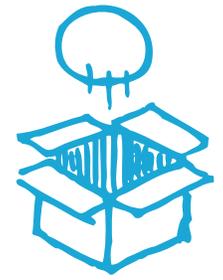
Practical Tip



Make the effort to use locations familiar to participants

It is often easier to engage new and diverse participants at the community places they normally frequent. Because these are not arts venues, be prepared to improvise and/or create makeshift arts spaces. Once people are engaged and trust takes root, deepening the relationship may include inviting participants into your own arts facility and involving them in your organization beyond the art itself (e.g., asking participants to take on roles in community outreach or active volunteerism).

Try New Approaches



Lesson #6:

New methods and styles can reach participants who perceive art as “not for me”

When trying to engage first-time arts participants, grantees encountered misunderstanding, resistance, mistrust and lack of interest in art. They had to explicitly communicate what art is, how to experience it, and why or how it was relevant to the participants. Artistic approaches needed to be inviting, reflecting who the participants are and drawing them in. These approaches did not need to be complex. One grantee advised, “Recognize that there is a lot of meaning in a small thing. Sometimes simple things like beating a drum (or) getting their hands on a mask... can be the difference from not engaged to engaged.”

Changing artistic approaches and processes was difficult for some grantees. It required them to stretch to make the art meaningful to new participants. They adjusted artistic content and strategy, balanced accessibility with entertainment, provided guidance and collaborated with participants. The experience brought valuable lessons about flexibility and community responsiveness. For example, one grantee encountered interruption of a performance by participants who were not familiar with theater, and chose to embrace this as “part of the cultural exchange that we intended to initiate.”

Deeper modes of participation yield more meaningful interaction with, and trust from, new participants. Grantees had particular success with inter-generational and family-friendly activities, as well as autobiographical projects that provided a personal door into the art.

Practical Tip



Encourage active participation and co-creation

Intentionally including the participants’ own experiences or work in a performance, exhibition, written collection or other final product has value. It helps new participants understand the creative process. It allows them to see art as something that can be “for me” — reflecting their own lives and perceptions — and feel the pride of sharing their creations with the larger community.

Align Your Team

Lesson #7:



Engagement calls for diverse capabilities, training and practices for artists and staff

Because arts engagement was new to many grantees, they involved artists who had distinct talents, skills and approaches suited for this work. Most successful were artists who could communicate and interact well with the public and could be, as one grantee put it, “ambassadors of our art form.” Where relevant, grantees selected artists who were bilingual, community-based and/or from a specific racial or ethnic group. They hired artists to be teachers, directors, mentors, community facilitators and workshop leaders; several recruited artists specifically interested in engagement work, while others trained artists to interact with communities. One grantee saw an increase in volunteers who were inspired by the organization’s engagement project.

Particularly for small- and mid-size arts organizations, taking program risks resulted in strains on staff capacity. For example, one grantee that typically worked with youth required staff to work on Friday evenings and weekends when the adult participants they sought to engage were more available. Grantees adjusted existing staff responsibilities, hired new staff and/or contracted with others to fill roles as community liaisons, project managers, community engagement managers, social media specialists and teaching artists. New staff and contractors needed the technical skills for their position as well as community organizing or engagement experience, bilingual skills if relevant, and their own relationships with the target community. A number of grantees organized staff and contractors into “engagement teams” to ensure coordination across department functions and fast integration of on-the-ground learning.

Engagement activities led staff to re-assess their standard approaches to programming and planning, question their own assumptions about unfamiliar communities and populations, establish new relationships with people and organizations, and gain perspective on their organization’s role and reputation in the community.

Practical Tip



Choose your team thoughtfully

Artists and staff must have relevant talents, skills and artistic approaches — such as community engagement experience; bilingual ability; teaching, facilitation or collaboration skills; cultural competency and more.

Contracting artists, liaisons and other team members from the target community itself may be a good way to augment your staff. Be sure to structure project team roles, internal communications and decision-making for fast, informed and effective on-the-ground implementation.