Arts and the Pursuit of Excellence: The Benefits of Relationship Building through Community Engagement

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The arts as institutions in America, in their original formation, were not reflections of their community. On the contrary, they were a product of the locally prominent citizens seeking an outlet of expression and intellectual exchange. As the public moved beyond the industrial revolution and into modern day society, arts organizations continued to pursue organizational success by continually investing in the organizational roles of arts organizations at the turn of the twentieth century. This static, internal pursuit of excellence has built barriers between the community and the institution. Globalization, technology, and the age of information have greatly shifted our contemporary world in terms of communication and how people experience products and services. In an interconnected and global economy, industries are investing in external relationships to maximize organizational value. To thrive in the interconnected market, arts organizations must cease to exist as internally driven entities and reconnect with the public. Community engagement is a process in which arts institutions enter into relationships with external organizations, businesses, groups, or individuals that produce mutually beneficial outcomes; it offers a solution to the arts organization’s struggle to connect and demonstrate value in society.

This paper first explores the conditions that have formed arts organizations, as we know them today, comparing the arts industry with the defining factors of the current global market. I then bring forth the possibility for relationship building between the arts and public through community engagement, providing a comprehensive definition of community engagement, as well as the benefits a successful community engagement initiative can produce. In the concluding chapter of the paper, I suggest a strategic approach to community engagement, as well as call attention to future challenges that the arts will face when implementing a community engagement strategy in the modern marketplace.
# Table of Contents

Abstract 2

Introduction 4

What Is Community Engagement? 7

Meaningful Engagement 8

Mutual Benefit 9

Types of Community Engagement 9

The Benefits of Community Engagement 13

1. Increasing Attendance 13

2. Attract Donors 14

3. Building Legitimacy within the Community 15

Better Decision-Making 16

Sharing and Expanding of Knowledge and Skills 17

The Approach to Strategic Community Engagement 18

1. Reposition the Organization's Goals and Mission 20

2. Identify a Problem Within the Community 21

3. Internal Analysis: Identify Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses 22

4. External Analysis: Identify the Organization's Stakeholders 23

5. Define a Co-created Community Engagement Plan 25

Best Practices: Cleveland Museum of Art 26

Challenges of Strategic Community Engagement 29

Conclusion 31

References 33
Introduction

Economically speaking, the arts industry is a product of a unique exchange, where consumers are not paying for the quality of a product or service, but rather an experience (Kreidler, 1996). In these terms, an organization’s experiential utility rested in its collections and repertoires. The artistic experience serves as the core mission for organizations today, many of which were defined during the establishment of arts as institutions in America. Post-Industrial revolution U.S. citizens experienced a mass increase in the establishment of the arts during the turn of the twentieth century. During this time, America underwent a time of construction that Steven Conn (2010) refers to as the country’s “urban moment” (p.199). Arts establishments went up in Boston, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia as a means for cultural interaction in a more industrially developed era. These organizations were not a product of the national government, but the efforts of local groups of the wealthy and prominent (Conn, 2010). Art served as a means for culturally inclined individuals to leisurely interact with one another, as well as exchange intellectual ideas (Borwick, 2012). The initial development of the arts as institutions in America was generated around shared assumptions about the public desires as well as what constitutes an enjoyable experience (Conn, 2010). This created an isolated market for the arts: they were created, visited, funded, and maintained by a social group of committed arts enthusiasts. To continue institutional growth, arts organizations embarked on a long quest for internal excellence, investing in its collections or repertoires, and expanding consumer opportunities through restaurants, gift shops, and other additions. The internal pursuit of excellence is how American arts institutions seek to thrive in the economy: by investing in themselves.
Gazing beyond the arts industry, the American economy has transformed immensely since the establishment of art institutions. The Industrial Revolution brought on several shifts to American society. Demographics expanded due to immigration, the nation’s land became more urban and highly concentrated in city regions, and with the high influx of industrial expansion, workweeks became longer and leisure-time began to shrink (Kreidler, 1996). Technology has been the greatest influence on the way the economy functions in modern-day society—it has completely changed the way people sell and consume in the marketplace, as well as the way human beings communicate and learn from one another. In the modern age of globalization, social networking, and the constant access to the Internet, boundaries that once separated industries have now collapsed, creating an interconnected economy. Companies that once sustained competitive advantage in a time where information was not so easily accessed find that these advantages have dissolved (Howard, 1990). In response, businesses are no longer building value through internal enhancements alone. John Falk and Beverly Sheppard (2006) discuss the ecological changes of society in relation to business and economies, and quote Cynthia Joba, a cultural anthropologist, stating, “our very survival may depend on our ability to shift into new ways of relating” (p.158). The interconnected marketplace calls forth the need to invest in relationships.

The arts, as all industries, have fallen victim to the changing tides of the modern economy. The arts classically pursue organizational growth through the pursuit of internal excellence. However, due to today’s globalized and technologically advanced market, the arts cannot thrive off of internal investment and artistic value alone. They must step beyond the walls of their institution, demonstrate societal value, and invest in external relationships. The process of community engagement is rooted in an ecological view of society, with businesspeople and
researchers alike recognizing that people are shaped and motivated by their physical and social environments (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Given the changes in the marketplace, arts organizations must seek out ways to become more integrated in society. Community engagement remedies the issue of isolation for arts institutions. The ultimate goal of community engagement is to enhance the community, but to also build trust, enlist new resources, and generate synergetic relationships. Community Engagement will allow arts organizations to build relationships with outside industries while demonstrating societal value (Simons, 2010). An arts institution that does not engage with its community is not maximizing its potential resources found in external entities. In order to thrive and find and institutional growth in a globalized market, arts organizations must invest in relationships through strategic Community Engagement.

In this paper, I first review the current literature on community engagement practices and implementation. I discuss the nature of the relationships as well as the level of involvement within different engagement initiatives. I also explore the various benefits of community engagement that arts organizations have experienced after initiating a community engagement initiative. Based on my literature review, I provide an approach for arts institutions to strategically form relationships and build an influential and mutually beneficial community engagement initiative. I conclude by citing the challenges and barriers for arts organizations’ in embarking upon successful community engagement initiatives in order to move forward in a continually changing economy.
What is Community Engagement?

Community engagement is a strategy that has evolved over the past several decades in both the nonprofit industry and for-profit industries in America. As defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011), a generally accepted definition of community engagement is “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people” (p.9). The development of community engagement is rooted in an ecological view of society, with businesspeople and researchers alike recognizing that people are shaped and motivated by their physical and social environments (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Moreover, it is a tactic to confront a diversifying U.S. population. Diversity within the U.S. extends beyond race, with increases in the number of ethnic backgrounds, cultures, age, religious beliefs, as well the changing dimensions of gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, political beliefs and other ideologies. Community engagement encourages organizations to communicate and interact with the changing dynamics of the American population, whether that means with social groups, other organizations, or individual citizens.

Community engagement remedies the issue of internalized efforts that has kept arts institutions from fully utilizing their assets and reaching maximum administrative capacity. The ultimate goal of community engagement is to enhance the community, but to also build trust, enlist new resources, and generate synergetic relationships with businesses, the local government, and community members alike. The core of a successful community engagement initiative that will drive institutional growth is one that provides mutual benefit by means of meaningful engagement (Borwick, 2010).
Meaningful Engagement

There is a distinct difference between outreach and engagement, and the implementation of outreach without meaningful engagement is what is keeping arts establishments from fully integrating into their local community. The primary purpose of outreach is to inform the community of the art organization’s achievements and programs. An example would be a free community performance, or providing an elementary school with a seminar on an orchestra’s educational program. What separates meaningful engagement from outreach is also what makes visitation and participation different. Outreach and visitation offer limited and fleeting fulfillment for the viewer; after the physical presence of art is gone, the visitor leaves, and any sort of benefit is left at the door. Engagement gives the community member an opportunity to participate in an activity, and provides an individual with some form of value. Value from engagement can come in many forms, such as intellectual growth, creative expression, social interaction, or positive youth development.

The key to meaningful engagement, and generating value, is creating an activity that sparks curiosity and fuels a desire to learn, grow, and contribute. Simons (2010) quotes Geoffrey Godbey, a professor of leisure studies at Pennsylvania State University, while analyzing the levels of satisfaction with leisure activities. “Leisure is a hierarchy. At the lowest level, it’s a search for diversion, high up it’s a search for pleasure, and at the top, it’s a search for meaning.” Meaningful engagement is the process by which an individual participates in an activity that stimulates social or psychological progression. Value will be found in activities that makes people think, feel, or move beyond their daily stagnant routines. For arts organizations impact
the local environment, it must produce meaningful engagement opportunities that stimulates value.

**Mutual Benefits**

The second vital component of a successful community engagement strategy is generating benefits for all parties involved. Mutually beneficial strategies are ones that have a positive impact on a community’s economic, social, educational, or cultural state, while also bringing positive outcomes for all businesses or institutions involved. An example of this would be a ballet company engaging in a youth development program with local schools; the school’s educational efforts are more attractive, and the ballet company has expanded its artistic outreach for potential audiences and funding. This mutually beneficial relationship between the arts institution and an external business, group, or organization ensures continuity of positive impact by means of equal effort. Both the arts organization and external entities have a stake in the outcome of the project, as well as the potential for gaining When there is equal effort, is will decrease the risk of management being biased or short-sided when making important decisions that will affect the engagement’s outcome.

**Types of Engagement**

Arts institutions can choose to engagement with their local community with an endless number of projects, collaborations, and initiatives. There are several existing models of the various types of community engagement programs. Although varying in names and definitions, there is a running pattern that each type of engagement measures the amount of:

1. Collaborative effort
2. Participation in the community
Different types of engagement require varying levels of commitment from both the arts institution and the community, and thus yield different results (Network for Business Sustainability, 2012).

**Community Investment**

Community investment is an agreement between an arts institution and an external community entity that exercises limited dedication from both entities. The arts establishment engages in an arm’s length transaction, providing assistance as a “good neighbor.” Community investment involves lending out one of the institutions valuable resources. This could include providing human resource skills in the form of an employee volunteer for a community organization, or the organization providing physical space for the community program or event. As a one-way transaction, the arts organization has complete control over the level of involvement and management of its resources. The remote nature of the partnership between the arts organization and the community causes several limitations for the level of community engagement that takes place. First, the arts organization’s resources are only temporarily shared with the community. Mutual benefit falls short with community investment practices, since it allows for only a short period of time for arts organizations to exchange resources and skills with external entities. The fleeting nature of the one-way transaction also produces shallow levels of engagement. The community gains only short-term benefits from the arts institution, and within that short period of time, there is a lot of personal responsibility placed in the hands of the individual community member to seek out meaningful engagement, as opposed to a long-term program that builds meaningful engagement over time. The institution’s recognition of involvement in the community will soon be forgotten, and both entities have a limited opportunity to learn from one another.
Community Involvement

Community Involvement involves a two-way transaction, allowing for deeper connections and long-range benefits that cannot be produced in a single instance. Community involvement takes place when the arts establishment takes into account the community’s input in shaping its organizational strategy or programming plan. Although the two entities share information, they still remain separate. For example, museums will sometimes engage their community by hosting forums or conducting surveys about what the community desires for programming. The result may be a new program or initiative at the request of a community group. These types of community involvement initiatives promote a two-way exchange between the arts entity and the community. Furthermore, engagement between both parties is sustained for a period of time, and each side gains new value from the transaction that takes place (Falk & Sheppard, 2006). The arts institution remains in control of the engagement initiative, but considers the needs and desires of its community when making organizational decisions and transactions.

Community Integration

The final strategy is one that requires mutual management and promotes joint learning between the institution and the community, and thus yields the greatest amount of benefit for both parties involved. Community integration requires shared control of a community engagement initiative from both the community and the institution. It generates meaningful engagement by co-creating a program for the community. An example a school and an art museum launch a joint program that directly integrates with the school’s current history curriculum with the museum’s collections. The school expresses a desire for arts education led by the museum’s experts that will drive student involvement in extracurricular activities. The art
museum and the school can co-create a program that involves students creating art that mimics
the current exhibition.

Community investment, involvement, and integration are three different types of
community engagement strategies. In general, the level of engagement increases with the amount
of effort and collaboration among the involved parties. As previously discussed, one of the main
causes for community investment falling short with providing mutual benefit and meaningful
engagement is the short length of the transaction. In addition, the one-sided management leads to
little exchange between the arts, the external entity, and community members. Extending the
community engagement strategy over a period of time, arts organizations and the community can
allow for community members to collect meaningful experiences and forges deeper
relationships, not with just one another, but with the arts institution as well. Community
integration allows arts institutions to tap into new resources, strengthening the capacity of both
entities involved. By further integrating the efforts of the art organization and an external entity,
resources and skills are pulled to generate the most effective and efficient community
engagement initiative possible—one that not only promotes mutual benefits for art institution its
collaborator, but also produces an engagement opportunity that adds meaningful value to the
community.

Thriving through Relationships: The Benefits of Community Engagement

Previously discussed were the ever-shifting trends of interaction and technology within the
global economy. As the economic climate surrounding the arts sector continues to change, the
arts sector itself has continued to grow since its firm establishment in the turn of the twentieth
century, with large influx in recent decades. In 2010, the arts nonprofit sector alone grew 49% to 113,000 organizations, outpacing the 32% growth rate of the entire nonprofit sector (Americans for the Arts, 2013). The arts sector is expanding in both population and the sheer size of the organizations participating in the market. As the arts industry grows, organizational success is shaped and driven by the institutional forces of funding, attendance, and organizational capacity (Conn, 2010). With the present global market and increasing interconnect society, these forces used to find organizational growth and success must extend beyond the arts establishment itself. By forging relationships through a community engagement initiative, arts institutions can gain attention from society and experience institutional growth. Institutional growth and success can be defined as capacity building for the organization; enhancing an organization’s capabilities, knowledge, finances, attendance, as well as its physical resources and facilities. These benefits described are the many ways an arts organization can experience growth by investing in external relationships through community engagement. The benefits of implementing a community engagement will vary according to the unique situation of the program, the community, and the entities involved. Below is a compiled list of benefits that have been experienced by arts institutions after initiating a community engagement strategy:

1. Increasing Attendance
2. Attracting Donors
3. Building Legitimacy
4. Better Decision-Making
5. Sharing and Expanding of Knowledge and Skills

**1. Increasing Attendance**

Although the primary purpose of any engagement plan is to cultivate cross-sector relationships within the community, there needs to be tangible gain from those relationships as well. An increase attendance displays the success of the arts, as well as provides direct revenue
for the establishment. Community engagement programs allow for stakeholders to experience the art in a more neutral territory. The integration of the arts into the daily routines and happenings of community members makes the arts more accessible, and can act as the gateway to future first time visitors and annual subscriptions. After experiencing an arts organization’s successful community engagement initiative, community members will develop a correlation between the success of the community and the arts institution’s programming and efforts. This will fuel consumer motivation and increase attendance rates. For example, the Aspen Art Museum experienced a steady increase in attendance after entering a partnership with the Aspen Skiing Company back in 2006. Combining sport with art, the collaboration places interactive sculptures on the ski slopes, as well as replaces traditional ski lifts and ticket boxes with contemporary creations of artists on view at the Aspen Art Museum (The pARTnerships Movement). Since the partnership’s initial season in 2006, the art museum has experienced an influx of visitors, most recently reporting a 200% increase in attendance in the 2011-2012 annual report (Aspen Art Museum, 2013).

2. Attracting Donors

Another primary concern of any arts establishment is the attraction and retention of funding. Arts organizations struggle more than ever today with capturing new audiences for donations, as well as seeking philanthropic outlets to receive the needed funding. David Gelles (2009) discusses the shift in finances from baby-boomers to the millennial generation with Ford W. Bell, the president of the American Alliance of Museums. Consumers are highly informed upon making buying decisions. According to Mr. Bell, “Younger philanthropists and donors today are looking for measureable results. It used to be you gave because it was the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But today younger donors have a lot to give to. They ask what the impact is
going to be and how you’re going to measure that impact” (p.F1). In a millennial impact study, it was found that 69% of surveyed millennials are most likely to donate when a nonprofit makes them feel inspired (The 2013 Millennial Impact Report, 2013). Thus, there is a direct parallel between the way people consumer products and the way they donate their money. Institutions can no longer rely on the glamorous, gravitational pull of the arts for funding. Community engagement offers tangible proof of societal impact for attracting donors. The positive effects on a community, be that be growth in economic cultural, or community terms, will offer tangible evidence that the arts offer value to the community. Donors will be more willing to give to a project, initiative, or event if the individual or business can see exactly where their money is going as well as observe the results of their donations.

Using the Aspen Art Museum and Aspen Skiing Company as another example, the museum also saw an increase in donations to the institution after the implementation of the partnership. A capital campaign for building renovations and the establishment on an endowment set several financial checkpoints for the institution to cover major institutional expenses. The initial start to the campaign received several donations, many of which were current patrons of the museum. In its most recent reporting, the campaign was able to reach its goal of $60,000,000 in contributions, with $20,000,000 as secured pledges for a short-term endowment. 2011 alone saw a 42% increase in assets from the previous year (Aspen Art Museum, 2013). The increase in donations for the capital campaign were a result of forging new donor relationships that may not have been possible without the popularity of the ski slopes’ art.

3. Building Legitimacy within the Community

Apart from the financial benefits an arts organization can receive from pursuing a community engagement strategy, the organization can also improve its reputation in the
Community engagement can build an art establishment’s morale and image. An arts organization can build trust with its community through a community engagement strategy. This can make an organization appear more credible and also decrease the chances of future conflict and controversy.

The Boston Children Museum provides an example of positive reputation building through its partnership with city programming for children. The museum experienced a boost of creditability and support upon participating in the CityACCESS program. This program is a collaborative project that embraces Boston’s diverse population and provides inner-city youth with opportunities to build professional and social skills through workshops and apprenticeships (Falk & Sheppard, 2006). The museum received a flood of advocacy, not just in financial terms, but also in verbal support and an increase in opportunities for future collaboration and business transactions. The Mayor of Boston stated “[the museum is] the most important arts and cultural institution in Boston for children” (Falk & Sheppard, 2006). The Boston Children Museum’s community engagement strategy strengthened the organization’s public image and established the reputation of being a key contributor to the enrichment and vitality of Boston. As a centerfold of urban enhancement, the museum will likely attract future opportunities for funding and other collaborative projects.

4. Better Decision Making

Neilsen Norman Group released a study on the Internet and its opportunity for user contribution and participation inequality. On average, a website will have 90% of its visitors casually browse its resources and content, with only 9% of visitors contributing any feedback. Of these 9%, the organization hears from mostly the same 1% of the site’s total traffic (Neilsen, 2006). What this means for arts organizations is that when they request feedback through the
web, the same 1% of users will provide most of the feedback. These users are typically people who frequently participate and/or donate to the institution. In crafting a decision-making strategy based on external feedback, an arts organization has the potential to use data that is not fully representative of its market. This can further isolate the institution from integrating with society. Community engagement combats the issue of participation inequality since it does not ask current participants what they like, but prospects potential audiences regarding what they would like to experience. By engaging with the community, arts organizations can better understand its current and future audiences. By understanding the community, the organization can make smarter business decisions with the entire community’s interest in mind.

For example, San Francisco’s Children’s Creativity Museum established the Creative Community Council—a group of talented and knowledgeable individuals that have the common goal of enhancing the community and who reflect the city’s diverse population (Durkin, 2012). In an effort to better understand its community, The CCC segmented its market in order to attempt to better understand the community’s needs. The diversity of the council enabled the group to stay in touch with each of the identified segments. The findings and recommendations of the CCC contributed to the Children’s Creativity Museum’s rebranding campaign to enhance the institution’s image and exhibits. The result was 43% increase in museum’s web traffic in the first year, and a 49% increase in number of new members each month (Children’s Creativity Museum, 2012). This successful community engagement strategy also served as a marketing strategy and helped the organization get to know its audiences and tailor its services appropriately.

5. Sharing and Expanding Knowledge and Skills
A good community engagement strategy can open doors to cross-sector collaboration and partnerships in which the organization involved can be exposed to new knowledge. Enhanced knowledge can come in many forms, such as gain knew technical skills for the organization’s employees for data management. Expanding an arts organization’s skills and capabilities increases the efficiency and effectiveness of its organizational efforts. An expanded network will lead to enhanced consultation, employee performance, business practices, and programming and financial opportunities.

After becoming a participant of the CityACCESS program, the Boston Children’s Museum created relationships with five other organizations outside of the arts industry. The BCM now had close contacts with industries such as food, nature and conservatory, and public transit, not to mention several contacts with private corporations, agencies, law firms, philanthropists, and other contributors (Falk and Sheppard, 2006). By expanding its relationships into external industries, the museum now has access to expertise and resources that otherwise might have otherwise been the cause of organizational limitations. The extended networks can lead to opportunities for the museum to receive better legal and financial consultation and future programming implementation. Following the involvement in the CityACCESS program, the Boston Children’s Museum has adjusted its organization structure and upgraded its facility with future programming for the community in mind (Falk and Sheppard, 2006). The realization of the need for organizational and facility changes occurred after interacting with outside industries and seeing the museum’s potential for growth.

These five benefits often occur consecutively. This is not to say that the benefits listed above cannot be experienced at the same time. I express in the argument that community engagement can have a snowball affect organizational benefits, with one benefit leading to
another. In the example of the Boston Children’s Museum, the CityACCESS program brought positive attention and legitimacy to the institution, which in turn increased attendance rates and over-all interest in the museum. The newfound success attracted donors, and also increased the BCM’s grant application success to roughly 95%, when previously its grant applications only had a 25% success rate (Falk and Sheppard, 2006). By expanding its network, the museum had opportunities for other collaborations, and caused the museum to restructure and expand its facility. In conclusion, community engagement can provide arts organizations with benefits—not only financial—that arts organizations may not be able to achieve on their own.

**Approach to Strategic Community Engagement**

Thus far, this paper discusses the various definitions of community engagement and argues that arts organizations increase organizational growth and value by pursuing a community engagement initiative. Successfully launching a community engagement strategy that connects an arts organization with an external business or organization is an opportunity that requires specific business conditions. Arts institutions must strategically design a community engagement plan that generates a synergetic relationship between itself and the other business and organization, and utilizes the integrated talents of the two to solve a problem in the community. Synergy is the alignment of resources and skills of two businesses to create a new initiative that possesses stronger organizational efforts than if each entity pursued the initiative alone (Barney & Hesterly, 2011).

The next section of this paper offers a suggested approach for organizing strategic community engagement efforts for arts organizations. The approach involves identifying a
relationship that is be mutually beneficial, as well as co-creating a plan with an external business that is specifically catered to the community. An overview of the approach is as follows:

1. Reposition the Organization’s Goals and Mission
2. Identify a Problem Within the Community
3. Internal Analysis: Identify Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses
4. External Analysis: Identify the Organization’s Stakeholders
5. Define a Co-created Community Engagement Plan

The overall goal of this strategy is to offer arts institutions an interdependent engagement plan that will benefit the community as well as build competitive advantages for the organization.

**Step One: Reposition Organization’s Goals and Mission**

A coherent strategy is only possible by defining a clear goal to be achieved by the organization. Without a clear aim for what is to be accomplished, the organization runs the risk of a fractured workforce. Community engagement, like any other programmatic undertaking by the institution, needs to receive a full and unified effort from the organization’s staff. In order to motivate the organization and its employees around a community engagement plan, community well-being must be integrated into an organization’s mission.

Arts institutions must answer the question “to whom do we serve?” An adjusted mission will create the determination needed from the staff in order to invest in the establishment’s relationships, and ultimately move away from the isolated and internally driven model of the past (Falk & Sheppard, 2006). In other words, the mission must appeal to a broader audience. An organization’s mission should partly strive for the betterment of the community, not just for those most closely related to the organization.

Re-examining the mission does not necessarily mean that organizations change the goals and passion that helped them form. Furthermore, community engagement does not mean
abandoning all current institutional efforts. Rather, arts establishments should reevaluate their role within the community. A successful community engagement strategy can be an additional component to an organization’s current mission. By expanding the mission to integrate the community’s needs, arts institutions open themselves to new external possibilities—ones that perhaps were not previously attainable.

**Step Two: Identify a problem or desire within the Community**

A successful community engagement plan has a bottom-up mentality, in that the plan starts with an identifiable community need or desire, and in responses accordingly, the arts institution will build a solution. Searching for an unmet need in the community can allows arts institutions to venture out into its local environment and get to know its community members. This includes researching local demographics trends, businesses, non-profits, and community programs within the same market. Qualitative research should be conducted to fully understand the perspectives of the community. This may include conducting surveys, case studies, or other informative methods. In conjunction with quantitative research, the arts institution should conduct qualitative research to further understand what the community needs. For example, interviewing and observing the community members and businesses can help an organization understand a community, and also will not only assist in creating a genuine depiction of the community, but also builds rapport with local citizens and fellow organizations.

As a conclusion to step number two, organizations gather the data they have collected and identify an existing problem in the community. The issue/problem should target a specific sector of the community. This can help the organization to create a customized plan that caters to the group’s individualized needs, and as a result produce successful outcomes. Without
surveying its local environment, organizations might assume it can provide a service that will better the community. The bottom-up mentality can eliminate any assumptions made about the community’s needs that might lead an ineffective community engagement initiative.

**Step Three: Internal Analysis—Identify Your Institution’s Strengths and Weaknesses**

Having identified a problem to address with a community engagement initiative, the arts establishment goes on to formulating a solution. Part of this involves identifying the institution’s capabilities that distinguish it from all other establishments. In order to create a synergetic, integrated relationship with an external business, group, or organization, it is vital that the art institution must identify its own valuable, rare, and imitable capabilities that other external entities would benefit from. In other words, what sort of physical, social, and human capital does the arts institution have that others will want to access? By performing an internal analysis of an organization’s physical, social, and human capital, the arts institution will be able to identify its strengths. Furthermore, this process can help shed light on the functional areas in which the organization is lacking. In order to identify these strengths and weaknesses, the establishment must conduct internal quantitative and qualitative research. This might include employee evaluations, an analysis of current assets, financial and budget reviews, departmental interviews, and so forth. The newly defined strengths will pave the way to designing an effective engagement plan, and can help identify the type of external entity the institution should seek to build a relationship.
Step Four: External Analysis—Identify Your Stakeholders

The arts institution should now seek out external resources that will counteract the identified weaknesses found in step three. This is where the mutually beneficial component of the strategic community engagement plan comes into play: what resources can community stakeholder(s) offer to the arts institution? The stronger the synergy, the greater the likeliness of creating competitive advantage for both entities involved.

For a nonprofit organization, a stakeholder is any individual or entity that has the possibility of being affected by the organization (Network for Business Sustainability, 2012). Examples of stakeholders for arts establishments are community development groups, citizens, neighborhood committees, other non-profits, schools, or government agencies. It is important that one is aware of the difference between an organization’s audience and its stakeholders. Audience members are the ones that will be experiencing the community engagement efforts, while stakeholders are the individuals or entities in which the art institution will enter into a mutual managing effort of community engagement. Although it is possible for someone to be both an audience member and a stakeholder, the latter will be responsible for half the effort within the collaborative project or initiative. However, arts organizations are wise to look beyond its stakeholders that are existing audience members. The goal of this particular approach is to invest in relationships beyond artistic motives, and create competitive advantage through dynamic, integrated efforts. For arts institutions to fully maximize the benefits from community engagement, relationships should be forged within new entities in dissimilar industries.

Identifying the optimal stakeholders will require the institution to prioritize based on potential stakeholders’ core competencies, organizational goals, the art institution’s mission, and
the possible synergies that may be created after combining skill sets of the arts organization and external stakeholder. The ideal stakeholder for collaboration must:

- **Possess complementary skills and resources**- The skills and resources of the external stakeholder should fit well with the arts institutions identified strengths. Complementary skills and resources will lead to synergetic management of the community engagement initiative. In other words, the pulled strengths and resources of the arts organization and stakeholder will create a stronger organizational effort than if each entity approached a community engagement strategy alone.

- **Accept your institutions mission**- This goes beyond the part of the mission that is geared towards the community. A stakeholder must find value in the establishment’s artistic endeavors as well. Without the support and respect of the stakeholder for the institution, the stakeholder will not be invested in working towards mutual benefits and payoffs for the organization.

- **Shared perception of the community problem**- In order to co-create a plan that will solve a problem within the community, the stakeholder and arts institution must agree upon the exact parameters of the identified problem. This involves having a thorough understanding of the population the problem affects, potential causes of the problem, and why it has not already been solved.

- **Shared perception of the engagement’s mission**- This goes back to the need for a clear mission and set of goals. Having a clearly defined objective for the community engagement strategy will help establish an achievable milestone for the organizations to work towards. The shared perception will lead to a cohesive managerial effort from both entities, which will ensure the completion of a successful engagement plan.
• **Shared Vision of engagement’s outcome and impact**- The arts organization and the stakeholder must share the same vision of impact and meaningful engagement. This involves having a mutual understanding of the types of goals the plan needs to achieve, and how the program will look and function once it is implemented. Without a shared vision of outcome and impact, organizational efforts will be fractured and the overall effectiveness of the program will be diluted.

**Step Five: Define the Collaborative Project**

After identifying a problem within the community, re-examining your organization’s mission, and working collaboratively to select an engagement strategy, the final step before implementing the plan is to design the specific project you are going to offer to the community. Upon co-creating a specific project, the arts institution must be able to connect it directly back to its institutional mission statement. If the previous four steps have been achieved, then the arts institution’s mission should already be well integrated into the engagement plan.

The important task at hand with selecting a project is formulating one that is content-driven, meaning that the initiative provides meaningful engagement. Community engagement strategies should offer a compelling interaction. Meaningful engagement is what will affect the strategy’s results. The information gathered from step one will help formulate a compelling engagement opportunity for the community. Engagement fails when people feel that their efforts or the task at hand is trivial and inconvenient (Simon, p. tba). Discover what types of experiences the community wants to be a part of, and build an initiative that will not only ask them to get involved and learn something new, but also contribute a part of their own opinions and intellect to the overall engagement.
Best Practices: The Cleveland Art Museum

Dedicated as an institution to the enhancement of the Cleveland community, the CMA seeks to be a welcoming place to all citizens. Upon embarking on a $350 million capital campaign in 2002 to renovate and expand the institution, the Cleveland Museum of Art saw this as an opportunity not only to increase the square footage of displayed masterpieces, but also as chance to design around the idea of enhancing the lives of the locals. The renovations’ plans proceeded with the art’s accessibility to the public in mind. The redesign, among several other components, featured a new glass atrium, state-of-the-art technology and installations for visitor engagement, a more streamlined circulation of paths for foot traffic, and an overall more inviting and aesthetically pleasing museum space to supplement the other visitor-minded renovations (Cleveland Museum of Art, 2014). The final product was a more welcoming and open museum, providing an ample mount of space for new collections, expanded programs, and social leisure. In tandem with the atrium’s opening, the fall of 2012 marked the inauguration of the CMA’s Community Engagement 360 initiative, described as a “diverse consortium of leaders working to more actively connect the museum—physically, socially, and intellectually—with the life of the community” (Cleveland Museum of Art, 2013a). The initiative strives to utilize the atrium’s vast space for visitor engagement within the museum, but also seeks to expand the types of opportunities and relationships created through the CMA’s engagement efforts. These outgrowths are meant to diversify the experiences the people of Cleveland will have with the institution, increase the number of outlets for communal expression and interaction, and most importantly, deepen the community’s connection with art.
Several programs and initiatives were produced from the continuing efforts of Community Engagement 360. The CMA’s relationship with Global Cleveland is a fine example of two diverse organizations entering into a strategic community engagement initiative. Global Cleveland is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the regional economic development of Cleveland by means of tourism and visitation, connecting outsiders socially and economically to the greater Cleveland area (Global Cleveland, 2013). Just a single initiative of the vast Global Cleveland efforts, the convener’s ultimate goal was to create an understanding of Cleveland to the global community. Meran Rogers, Global Cleveland’s Director of Community Affairs, interviewed with Karen Connelly (2013) and cited the specific goals of the initiative as “attract and retain Asian newcomers who will support the growth and talent needs of businesses and industries; assist Asian newcomers and young professionals in establishing roots; and foster an inclusive and welcoming community for Asians.” Needing a way to not just attract, but to welcome and integrate Asian populations into the Cleveland community, Global Cleveland was lacking a way to express the city’s global awareness and involvement to the Asian demographic. As an arts institution that is dedicated to enriching the community, the CMA was already in a position to serve Global Community’s cause. The CMA also had several resources that would appeal to Global Cleveland’s initiative. With the recent renovations, the museum’s facility was a shining example of the city’s urban assets. Moreover, the Cleveland Museum of Art has one of the most highly regarded collections of Chinese art in the western hemisphere (Cleveland Museum of Art, 2013c). Global Cleveland benefited from utilizing the museum’s space and collection as a means of engaging the fast growing Asian population with the cultural scene of Cleveland. Kathy Taylor, the CMA’s Director of Advancement Administration, expressed that the CMA received several benefits from the relationship as well. Previously struggling to
penetrate the Asian population of visitors and locals, the Cleveland Museum of Art was able to leverage Global Cleveland’s clout in its community by expanding its audience base. By partnering with an organization that is both highly connected and well regarded in the community, the CMA is now part of a network of catalysts for enhancing Cleveland’s visitor retention. In addition, the CMA was able to create new jobs and strengthen its human resources based on its relationship with Global Cleveland’s forward-thinking staff and business practices. What started out as an economic development venture, the co-created Asian cultural engagement initiative strengthened the city’s cultural attractiveness through community engagement. By combining capacities and resources, the CMA and Global Cleveland created an initiative that welcomes Asian populations into the community, carves out a meaningful sense of belonging for them, and retains the population’s talents and skills.

The partnership with Global Cleveland is just one example of newly found CMA relationships. Other collaborations were forged as part of the museum’s expansive Community Engagement 360 initiative. The events and programs produced through these relationsips strive to be “accessible in every sense of the term—physically, socially, and intellectually” (CMA, 2013a). In an annual report from the museum’s 2012-2013 performance, the CMA received a staggering 39% increase in attendance from the previous year—the highest attendance the institution had seen in the last decade (CMA, 2013b). Referenced by the museum as a key contributing factor, the community-minded events allowed for people to engage with art in an accessible way, and encouraged participants to experience the museum in other platforms, whether that be by attending the museum directly or participating in another one of its festivals.

After the Cleveland Museum of Art’s increased and diversified its community engagement opportunities, the institution experienced an 80% increase in annual fundraising
efforts, with nearly $36 million donated (Yamamoto, 2013). In addition, these donations were not flooded into the community-specific program, but were dispersed throughout the entire establishment, supporting maintenance and programming alike.

**Challenges of Strategic Community Engagement**

The suggested approach to strategic community engagement will open doors for arts institutions by expanding its network of resources and distinguishing it among fellow industry competitors. An approach that calls for such great analysis, observation, and change is going to come with its fair share of challenges to the institution. These challenges are rooted internally within the artistic motives and business practices, and will likely create resistance for arts administrators from employees and donors alike.

First and foremost, the concern for any institution when engaging in a new strategy should be “will it align with our current mission?” As a nonprofit organization, all decisions should be made with the overall institutional goal in mind. Many organizations might not have the community’s well being in mind when delivering artistic experience. This concern especially runs true for those institutions that are considered ‘high arts.’ There is a continuous discussion as to whether or not ‘high art’ can be appreciated by the general public, along with the uncertainty that everyone can truly enjoy art. Artists, institutions, and institutional supports alike are concerned that with the establishment of community engagement, the quality of the art they so dearly treasure will be sacrificed. Supporters want art to remain challenging and up to par with their knowledgeable sense of art history and analytical criticism. Artists have the concern that personal expression and intellect will be comprised when trying to cater to the public’s interests and conceptual abilities (Borwick, 2012). Arts administrators will be faced with the challenge of
creating community engagement initiatives that will adhere to the public’s interests and needs, without eroding the long-established love of emotionally and mentally up-heaving artistic expression.

In addition to the struggle to remain mission driven and artistically superior, an institution’s current programming attendance and funding might be at risk. There is a possibility that instead of engaging with community members and attracting new donors, patrons will simply migrate from one program to the next. This is what is referred to as market cannibalism; when an institution introduces a new product or service to the market and fails to draw in new audiences, but only shifts current members from one product to the next (Barney & Hesterley, 2011). This creates an inflated measure of success and growth. The new program may generate $50,000 of donations and help the community, but these improvements will be meaningless if the institution is losing funding and involvement in older programs. Arts institutions will be faced with the challenge of creating and measure net success and growth of the community engagement plan.

The increasingly diverse population of the United States will create a continuous struggle for community engagement initiatives (Crane, 2011). As populations change, and globalization continues, arts leaders will be faced with the challenge of finding methods of engagement that translate across several languages and cultures. New technological resources will have to be created for the audience member to easily access the institution’s experiences. Furthermore, innovative hospitality and other methods of interaction with the community will be crucial as well. For community engagement to create an equal impact across an entire population, each individual must have an authentic experience, regardless of the language or cultural background.
Lastly, effective community engagement is going to require arts organizations to develop new human resources and communication skills. Engaging with your community will require a great amount of flexibility, as well as constant research and observation of its citizens, social trends, and other businesses and organizations. Training efficient leaders, as well as increasing an diversifying the staff, will be the most prominent struggle for arts organizations over the next couple of years. The ability to mitigate conflict across sectors will be a vital skill of future arts administrators. Management must be able to envision a collaborated project, know where each expertise and resource will come from, align synergies, and then communicate with both sides of the equation to smooth over misunderstandings. This will take a great deal of strategic practice, as well as amiable interpersonal communication. Another future barrier for community engagement will be providing funding for its programming and initiatives (Crane, 2011). This will involve creating a dynamic profile of income sources. One positive aspect of co-creation is the diverse interest that is invested in combined mission. A bank, for example, might not directly fund an orchestra, but if it is collaborating with a hospital then the bank might be more inclined to invest. Nonprofits will have to utilize their differences and finding funding that will not only support the co-created projected, but also each of the separate entities’ missions.

**Conclusion**

Globalization and the integration of the economy has changed the way industries compete and grow. Institutions are facing a time of needed personal reflection to determine the future of the arts industry. Institutions need not adopt my suggested approach—there are several other suggest methods of financial stability that exist for the current state of the arts. However, if the arts sector wishes to transcend beyond the walls of its institutions, impact the public, and claim
its rightful place as leaders of cultural influence and economic change, they must step away from isolation and join the ranks of the interconnected global economy. Strategic community engagement will allow arts institutions seeking to advance in modern times and generate value in society. By building relationships with external industries through community engagement, the arts can be webbed into the network of industries that provide America with growth and innovation. In a marketplace where boundaries have collapsed, arts institutions that thrive will be the ones that find invest in relationships, building organizational value through the exchanging of resources, and become catalysts of community enhancement.
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