Holding the mirror up: Institutional reflections on driving a more equitable city through the arts

A report submitted to the Metropolitan Nashville Arts Commission
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Introduction

Across the country, efforts to boost the role of the arts in shaping cities by enhancing urban growth and revitalization, contributing to economic development, and fostering engagement in civic life are enjoying a surge of energy. In the Nashville metropolitan region, where the population is expected to grow by an estimated one million people by 2040, the arts sector has been active in its efforts to imagine and plan for the future of the city while bolstering the health and sustainability of a textured arts ecosystem. Specifically, the Metropolitan Nashville Arts Commission ("Metro Arts" from hereon) has articulated three priority areas in the city's plan, NashvilleNext: (1) cultivating creative placemaking, (2) improving access and participation in the arts, and (3) building, attracting, and retaining talent.[1]

In 2015, Metro Arts also released its own 5-year strategic plan, adding to the NashvilleNext priorities a vision of every Nashvillian participating in a creative life and a mission to drive an equitable and vibrant city through the arts. To achieve these goals, Metro Arts seeks to strengthen the sector's commitments to fostering understanding, forging genuine relationships with the multiple communities they serve, and heightening awareness of institutional practices that promote and inhibit cultural inclusion and access. These commitments are not secondary to maintaining Nashville's creative identity; rather, they are believed to be essential to the health and survival of the arts ecosystem and to the urban communities it engages.

The focus on cultural equity is in line with a national movement to emphasize racial equity in arts philanthropy. In 2015, Grantmakers in the Arts released a public statement on its commitment to making "racial equity in arts philanthropy a primary focus of the organization" and to addressing institutional racism and structural inequities through their educational and funding activities.[2] The focus on cultural equity also reflects what cultural activist Roberto Bedoya argues is a critical component of a reflexive creative placemaking practice – one that is concerned not only with promoting cities with economic vitality, but cities where residents feel a true sense of belonging. Creative placemaking, he suggests, can be neither effective nor ethical without a commitment to dismantling practices, policies, and systems of injustice that are reproduced by arts promoters.[3]
To move the needle on equity in Nashville, Metro Arts seeks to build a community of

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[1] Cole, J, & Hoover, C. (2013). Arts & Culture Background Report. Submitted to NashvilleNext. *Metropolitan Nashville Planning Department.*

[2] Grantmakers in the Arts (2015). "Racial Equity in Arts Philanthropy: Statement of Purpose." www.giarts.org.

[3] Bedoya, R. (2013). "Placemaking and the Politics of Belonging and Dis-belonging." *GIA Reader, 24*(1).

leaders who are willing and equipped to engage complex questions of equity in their organizations' art and cultural practices. Toward this end, the current project gathers non-profit arts and cultural organization leaders' baseline understanding, perspectives, and practices as they relate to cultural equity. Between June and August 2015, Metro Arts worked with a consultant to have conversations with leaders of 18 non-profit arts and cultural organizations across the city, representing a wide range of artistic practices, business models, organizational missions, core audiences, sizes, locations, and tenure in the city. In addition to describing their role in Nashville's arts ecosystem and current work, non-profit leaders discussed their greatest challenges, as well as resource and opportunity gaps to be addressed in order to advance cultural equity.

This report is intended to serve as a launch point for further investigation, conversation, and action planning. Rather than present a comprehensive survey of the programs, exhibits, productions, events, or policies put in place to increase access and foster cultural inclusion, it highlights and interprets the major themes that emerged from the conversations. Examples are provided to elucidate the themes, though they do not represent the entirety of institutions' efforts. As reflected in this report, there are complex challenges to confront on the path toward cultural equity in Nashville. However, the city is also equipped with cultural leaders who bring strong passion for their art and devotion to facilitating meaningful cultural experiences. Indeed, this project would not have been possible without their willingness to share their institutional successes and struggles and to engage in the process of reflection and change that lies ahead.[4]

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[4] See appendix for a list of participant institutions.

The foundation upon which to build: current commitments and approaches to equity

At the heart of Nashville's arts non-profits' work is a strong belief in the power of the arts to create opportunities for transformation – transformation of the self, of relationships, or of space. Driving a more equitable community means harnessing this innate potential, creating more opportunities to be with, see, and learn from each other in new or changed ways, and ensuring that these opportunities can be sustained. Resoundingly, institutional leaders voiced that a strong arts and cultural ecosystem in Nashville equates to fertile ground for a more equitable city. Leaders expressed the innate potential of the arts to serve as convener and facilitator of interactions among people who are unlike each other or who would otherwise not meet, that the arts can serve as a conduit through which people make human connections and see each other in new ways, and that the arts can create opportunities for hard conversations that often times seem unapproachable or off-limits. Participants shared that their cultural spaces ignite a universal aesthetic and intellectual curiosity, make us better people, draw out the complexity of human experience, are natural doorways to public engagement, and inspire essential civic skills - empathy and awareness building.

Institutions' approaches to promote access, inclusion, and equity in the city fall into three general categories. While these categories will serve as a useful heuristic, they should not be seen as entirely stable. Organizations do not neatly abide by one single approach; rather they move between them. Furthermore, each category possesses promises and pitfalls, and thus no single approach should be considered a silver bullet or appropriate for every circumstance or institution.

Diversity approach

Non-profit arts and cultural institutions in the city hear the call to *be relevant* and are connecting this goal to cultural equity. Most institutions expressed that they have embraced this call for relevance, and had they not they would be neither surviving nor thriving. Though often motivated by financial necessity, with few exceptions, leaders are enthusiastic about opportunities created by the changing racial, ethnic and age make-up of the city. Staying relevant and driving equity are achieved through a broad range of programs and efforts that respond to these changing demographics.

Several institutions are offering a wider range of artistic expressions than have traditionally been offered by their respective genres. For example, and there are several more, the Nashville Ballet has done work with popular rock artist Ben Folds as well as the Fisk University Jubilee Singers; the Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum has honored rock and roll and R&B works, as has the Nashville Symphony; the Frist Center for the Visual Arts partners regularly with cultural organizations across the city to enhance the diversity and depth of its exhibits, including one partnerships with the Nashville Shakespeare Festival to produce multicultural programming around an Early America exhibit. These major institutions and smaller ones are also doing programming that attempt to speak directly to particular ethnic or identity-based audiences, for instance the Dia de las Muertas program at the Cheekwood Botanical Gardens and Musuem of Art.

Similarly, major cultural institutions are presenting works from artists of color and artists from underrepresented backgrounds to ensure that Nashville's increasingly multicultural population is mirrored in the nature of the art and to expose residents who will never leave Nashville to the art of global cultures. Multiple organizations work with departments at Vanderbilt University to connect to authors and writers from multicultural backgrounds. Other institutions connect with community groups like the Jubilee Singers or local identity-based arts groups to present works in conjunction with the main repertoire to bring in diverse audiences.

A plethora of free and reduced-price ticketing options have been instituted to encourage attendance for all income brackets, and many camp opportunities that support engagement with the arts are made available to young people regardless of their ability to pay.

To grow the diversity of creative workers and retain talent, institutions take steps to promote artistic development as well as supportive work environments. The W.O. Smith School works exclusively with low-income students to develop their skills and provides support for them to continue advancing their artistry beyond their time in high-school; and the Nashville Symphony is developing the Accelerando program to provide opportunities for music students who are part of non-traditional demographics of core audiences to have the chance to go to music school and become professional musicians. The Nashville Ballet provides onsite wellness care and nutrition support to its artists. Many performing arts organizations make a commitment to hiring local actors and to hiring them under union contracts.

Interactional approach

Many institutions pursue cultural equity through an approach that strengthens relationships among artists, audiences, and Nashville's communities. Using this approach, institutions deepen the connections between arts and communities, sustain those relationships, and, in some cases, use them as a foundation for expanding understanding of individuals, organizations, communities, and the systems in which they are embedded. One

leader described this interactive approach to building connections with communities as non-linear and non-transactional.

The choice to show or produce art that can "have broad appeal" is made to attract a wide swath of community members (approaching equity through diversity) and also to prompt community members to be in conversation with one another. Success is contingent on getting a broad mix of people together to have collective experiences, share differing opinions with one another, and gain exposure to new ways of being and thinking.

Applying an interactional approach has, in some instances, meant producing provocative content or exploring social issues in play. For example, the Nashville Opera's upcoming production of "Hydrogen Jukebox" confronts issues surrounding freedom of speech and hopes to start a rich conversation about what that means in modern society, in the United States and internationally. The Belcourt Theatre has hosted a number of pre- and post-show conversations for audiences and film artists. The Nashville Ballet and Tennessee Performing Arts Center (TPAC) convene audience development opportunities to build connections between the artists and audiences and to provide behind-the-scenes information, history, and context to enrich the artistic experience.

Community and educational programming that physically reaches into communities is primarily a way to reach non-traditional audiences (a diversity approach) – for example, free performances in parks, schools, and libraries. In some cases, however, these engagements are also developmental. The Belcourt Theatre Mobile Movie program in collaboration with Nashville's NAZA programs and the Martha O'Bryan Center, for instance, grows connections for young people with the film arts. Nashville Shakespeare Festival's read out loud program has served as a literacy enrichment and literary appreciation opportunity for participants at the public library and at Room in the Inn. When Nashville Shakespeare Festival summer set in Centennial Park becomes a shelter for homeless individuals, the organization helps its youth apprentices to build understanding and respect, explaining that the company is the guest of the homeless.

Through partnerships, institutions have worked to improve their cultural competence and awareness. For example, when efforts to build a larger Latino audience base were unsuccessful – website translation, a Spanish-language ticketing portal, and translation of performance materials received positive response from White audiences and had no traction with the Latino community – one institution worked with consultants from Nashville's Latino community to learn how, broadly speaking, to more meaningfully interact and engage with Latino audiences, and about common cultural norms and social expectations. Additionally, this learning has prompted a self-reflexive practice – a commitment to persistent evaluation of and dialogue about the organization's efforts to promote cultural equity. One leader suggested that building cross-cultural relationships and awareness in the non-profits arts world will also mean understanding how the presence of law enforcement or security personnel might impact the comfort of some audiences.

Several leaders believe that through meaningful partnerships, institutions can create artistic opportunities that will encourage a deepening of understanding or shifts in public perceptions. For example, both the Frist Center for the Visual Arts and Humanities Tennessee have partnered with scholars at Vanderbilt University as well as community leaders within Nashville's Muslim communities to develop exhibits and programming that will advance understanding of Islam.

Grassroots approach

A third approach to equity starts at or is driven by the margins and takes a holistic view of individuals as embedded in contexts that shape participation in creative life. The artistic format becomes the conduit for self or community expression rather than a product being offered. Organizations that employ this approach either carve out opportunities to lift up quieted experiences and voices within their existing programming, or have defined this mission as part of their core work.

Actor's Bridge Ensemble, for instance, runs an autobiographical writing and performance program for young women called "Act Like a GRRRL" that pushes against the social pressures put on young girls to sit down, be quiet, and be polite. In so doing it gives young women a space and vehicle to love themselves and each other more boldly.

Southern Word's core work is to give voice to people who have been typically silenced – largely people of color and low-income youth. While its work uses spoken word as the primary art form, it has expanded into using music since a lot of the writers are rappers, producers or singers. The participants themselves have been critical to the development of the organization: youth participants shared their experiences with their teachers, and requested that the program be brought into their schools.

A grassroots approach also translates into starting with participants' first needs. When working in schools, this has meant connecting the artistic work to teachers' existing curricula. When working with young people, this has meant providing supports that go beyond the arts. For example, one organization has provided space for their students' families to store their belongings when facing eviction.

Obstructions to dismantle: perceived challenges and barriers to enhancing equity

Despite these myriad efforts, Nashville's arts non-profits believe that there is a long road ahead. While steps are being taken to address overt discrimination and exclusion, implicit bias and structural inequity remain significant challenges to realizing a vision of equity.

Economic sustainability dominates institutional concerns

As Nashville has grown, the struggles to stay afloat have intensified for several cultural institutions. Rather than seeing a corresponding surge in audience numbers, leaders believe their audiences are being split between an increasing multitude of artistic media, venues and opportunities. The emergence of new cultural opportunities across the city has raised concerns about competition and redundancy in services. These concerns echo those expressed by the non-profit arts sector across the country and constitute what Terence McDonnell and Steven Tepper have called the current climate of "culture in crisis"[5]. Responding to these concerns, many arts non-profits nationally focus on maintaining the loyalty of current patrons and to tightening purse strings. In Nashville, concerns about keeping the doors open often dominate institutional leaders' priorities, making it difficult to imagine "doing more" than what they currently are doing.

Some institutions have articulated this challenge as not having the "risk capital" to more extensively program to an underrepresented audience demographic.

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[5] McDonnell, T.E., & Tepper, S.J. (2015). "Culture in Crisis: Deploying Metaphor in Defense of Art." *GIA Reader, 26*(1).

While they are able to do single shows or concerts that might attract a predominantly Latino audience, for example, their ability to provide a "consistent menu" is limited. There are those, however, who, while facing these budget challenges, believe that the solution is not to pull back from being more inclusive, but to lean in and become more involved in communities. Their hope is that the benefit of the investment will pay off in the long run.

Efforts to diversify face persistent hurdles

Overall, the model of equity as achieved through maximizing diversity has had limited success for arts and cultural organizations. This reflects the national trend articulated by Grantmakers in the Arts in its statement of purpose for achieving racial equity: "recommended solutions of the past, which have focused on diversity rather than structural inequities, have not resulted in nationwide successful outcomes in equitable inclusion and/or grantmaking to ALAANA [African, Latino(a), Asian, Arab, and Native American] artists and communities".[6]

Despite programs to attract more audiences and their efforts to enhance cultural relevance, major cultural institutions report that, in general, their audiences continue to reflect the national trends of art patrons – predominantly White, middle-to high income, and female. When their programming speaks directly to a different demographic, the make-up of the audience changes, but they struggle to sustain these spikes in audience diversity throughout a season and want to move past perceptions of having done the "Black show", the "Hispanic show", or the "Disabilities show."

Efforts to diversify their staff have also seen little success – many are posting job

opportunities more extensively than in the past, have asked recruiters to focus on finding diverse candidates, or are requesting that their existing multicultural audiences and participant bases share employment opportunities with their personal networks.

Interviewees are sensitive to the challenges around creating more diverse institutional boards. They are hesitant to increase racial and gender diversity through approaches that tokenize the experiences and backgrounds of individuals from historically marginalized or underrepresented communities. Many voiced that the call for more board diversity presents other challenges – for instance, it raises concerns about asking one person to represent the entirety of experiences of their particular community or routinely calling upon that representative to explain how decisions do or might impact a marginalized community. Leaders point to a lack of diversity among individuals who would even be appropriate to sit on a board – stating that they cannot simply "take anyone passing by" and decrying both a lack of diversity in the pipeline for arts administrators as well as the systems of inequality that are keeping women and people of color from rising economically and professionally.

Efforts to expand diversity have been stifled by what is described as a shortage of artists of color in the creative worker pipeline. While institutions express a strong desire to hire dancers, musicians, actors, film artists, and technicians from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, they note that their respective industries on a national level have not done an adequate job of diversifying the artist pool.

The fear of being asked to "do more" on top of what they currently do is rooted in the diversification approach to racial equity. The work of driving equity manifests through programs that must be funded, staffed, and *added to* the core work of the organization – the art itself. One leader expressed that

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[6] Grantmakers in the Arts, 2015.

developing programming geared toward diversity of audience and artists would be an added expense requiring connections and convincing of the underrepresented group with little value other than being able to use the term "inclusive." Another non-profit leader, however, expressed concern about an overreliance on programs to address cultural inequities, suggesting that programs are not sustainable – they run their course, the money runs out, or evaluations show that it did not have the anticipated result, and then the people or community being served is left with an unfulfilled promise. The scalability and sustainability of programs need to be considered from the start and should be a deciding factor in whether or not to initiate; further, organizations should more critically reflect on who is being served by the program – the individual/community or the arts institution itself.

Concerns abound regarding measurement of social impact

Across the cultural ecosystem, institutions face challenges around collecting data from their audience or participant bases. Many described that their current systems of collecting data – ticket sales databases, for example – are not appropriate for asking questions about race, ethnicity, income, or physical ability, and they are hesitant to stand in the door, counting people based on phenotype. Without accurate numbers, they simply do not know the extent of their institutional inclusivity or exclusivity. These shortcomings, they fear, will prevent them from acquiring financial resources to support their ongoing work as well as their efforts to promote access and inclusion.

These data collection and reporting concerns echo those of arts funders and grantees nationally. The call for stronger demographic data capacity has raised questions about privacy, accuracy, and levels of trust between grantmakers and grantees.[7] At the same time, arts grantmakers have demonstrated the power of demographic data to advance goals of equity and inclusion. For example, organizations in Kentucky and Philadelphia have leveraged demographic data to develop strategies to increase grantmaking to underrepresented groups, significantly change organizational governance, and promote art forms that lift up voices from the margins (i.e., reflecting the grassroots approach to equity). While complex challenges remain – for example to develop standards of equity, collect data using respectful and non-tokenizing methods, and confront barriers of language used around identity – funders believe that to move the needle on equity, the arts sector must establish a culture that values demographic data, and organizations must learn to examine it in ways that will prioritize building trust, fairness, and accountability to communities.[8]

Meaningful partnerships demand significant investment

Partnerships with organizations that serve particular communities of identity or affinity-groups have been a critical component to the diversity efforts of Nashville's arts non-profits. As noted above, these partnerships have been used to inform the content of an exhibition or performance, gain or serve a diverse audience, and attract artists of varying backgrounds. Partnerships appear to be made with a very small handful of community organizations, revealing a possible over-reliance on select visionaries or organizations to serve as connectors. This level of demand might be burdensome or it may create new

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[7] Jennings, J., & Brown, D.M. (2015). Building Equity and Inclusion by Assessing Demographic Data: Two Case Studies. *GIA Reader, 26*(2).
[8] Ibid.

kinds of disparities in access to opportunities in the city based on how wide the base of that community group. Some leaders are concerned that these partnerships are largely service-providing or transactional —giving free tickets, putting on a free show, teaching a free class or workshop– rather than relationship-building. Some current partnership models ask that a community or school partner fulfill a series of requirements in order to receive these services.

Several arts leaders noted that, while wanting their connections with community groups to be deep and meaningful, they have become paralyzed by the prospect of investing the amount of staff and financial resources that would be required. In addition to facing the pressures of limited resources, several leaders noted that while there are a multitude of organizations and communities with whom they could partner, they do not know how to start making the connections or are hesitant to provide something that "they may not really want." Indeed, some institutions shared that other cultures seem "off limits" in that it would be inappropriate for them to adapt their works to mirror a particular cultural community without being explicitly requested to and without having performers of the right background.

Negotiating city space and cultural place impacts the drive for equity

With few exceptions, most arts non-profits noted physical access as a barrier to increased diversity. The city's lack of a comprehensive public transportation system prevents individuals and families who are unable to drive or pay parking costs from participating in a multitude of events. Additionally, the physical nature and availability of cultural space itself is seen as a barrier, with some organizations desiring to make infrastructural changes that would facilitate and communicate greater inclusivity. For example, the Belcourt Theatre is embarking on a

renovation project that will open the façade of the building to be non-intimidating, welcoming, and conducive to interaction.

Non-music organizations express concern about limited performance space, a challenge that directly impacts their efforts to drive a more equitable community. For example, dependence on host sites to determine schedules can limit what these institutions are able to organize. While many of them desire to do more educational and community programming, they are stretched to find venues. They are glad to make use of available school and church spaces, but also note that such hosting entities can require that companies limit content to what is broadly considered 'family friendly', non-controversial, or a-political. Without the ability to push sensitive social issues or express un-censored material, organizations believe that their efforts to promote equity are sometimes limited.

Limited performance space and a persistent omission from the dominant cultural narrative of Nashville as "Music City" are interpreted as underselling organizations' public value. For example, promotional videos that give little mention of theatre arts are experienced as a marginalization of the art form (and the artists who make it) and missed opportunities for communities to have transformative experiences. Though the city is growing rapidly and attributing much of this growth to a population eager to live in a textured cultural environment, several organizations do not feel that their contributions to generating this attraction are being honored. As a result, they describe having to make decisions about resource allocation that limit the breadth and reach of their work into communities in order to maintain a high level of quality.

While the focus on improving physical access is critical to advancing equity, the city must also acknowledge and confront complex, historic, and systemic practices of

marginalization that have excluded multicultural populations from creative and civic life. Drawing again on the work of Roberto Bedoya, activating the arts to promote equity might mean expanding notions of cultural access beyond physical spaces to thinking about how to "build spatial justice, healthy communities, and sites of imagination" toward the cultivation of places of belonging and not just spaces of economic development.

Nashville arts and culture organizations have begun to weave an understanding of spatial justice into their work. When considering their location, several institutions addressed either directly or indirectly the impact of arts organizations on neighborhoods. Some institutions have embraced the role that they have played in driving reinvestments in Nashville's downtown and its ensuing commercial and economic development, and others have expressed caution about their spatial impacts. Organizations that rent space in gentrifying neighborhoods are cognizant that their presence might inadvertently accelerate cultural and demographic displacements. Other organizations that are looking to find space in emergent hot areas of town hope that their presence can be community-building rather than dividing.

Insidious assumptions about multiculturalism and excellence persist

Reflecting on their efforts to diversify audience, artists, board members, and staff, several arts non-profit leaders harbor notions that holding the door open is the most that they can do, and that ultimately it is a matter of personal choice and individual agency to walk through. Some institutions continue to believe that non-participation is simply an indication of non-interest – that perhaps multicultural communities 'just don't want to be at our event.' Another organization expressed concern that audiences may want only the "normal" repertoire rather than a multicultural one. The assumption about cultural normalcy strikes a chord of colonialism[9] and calls for critical reflection of organizations' cultural assumptions.

Many organizations state that their first commitment is to maintaining a high quality of artistic work to attract audiences to come through their doors. However, at the same time, the preservation of "excellence" and the need to uphold artistic integrity are reasons deployed over and again to explain the limited success of efforts to enhance cultural equity. One leader suggested that artists of color simply might not have the skills to uphold the level of excellence that is demanded by the organization or industry. Further, they equated being African American with not having the resources and social norms (ability to adhere to the rules of field) to pursue a professional career in the field.

The equation of equity or multiculturalism as diluting excellence must be interrogated by the arts sector. It raises questions regarding who arbitrates excellence and by what or whose standards. It reflects what McDonnell and Tepper found to be a lasting adherence to elitist understandings of high-culture nonprofits as symbols of precious and high status art that are threatened by pressures to be in relationship with communities in new ways. As the authors relate, these understandings "[reinforce] a belief that art and culture are not for all communities", tend to "[privilege] ceremony and distinction over engagement and connection", and lead to a "fail[ure] to mobilize broad support and demonstrate public relevance." [10] In other words, by their analysis, these understandings

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[9] Said, E. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism.* New York, NY: Vintage Books.
[10] McDonnell & Tepper, 2015.

are significant roadblocks to institutional change that moves towards equity.

"After all, we are in the South..."

Arts institutions grapple with the implications of being located in a city that upholds a cultural narrative of Southern politeness. This narrative manifests in audiences that can feel discomfort with multiethnic artists – particularly if they are touching in intimate ways or if they are lightly clad – or content that pushes audiences to engage in complex social issues. Companies or programs that focus on lifting up the voice of young people believe they are directly countering a Southern culture that has not historically been interested in having young people speak their minds.

At the same time that they note these embedded cultural beliefs or values, leaders commend arts audiences more broadly as being progressive – as "getting it" when it comes to producing art that is relevant and responsive to a multicultural and socioeconomically varied demographic. However, while audiences might be willing to gaze upon art and artists from various backgrounds – being fascinated spectators of an otherworldliness – they may be less activated to evaluate their embedded biases, privilege and positions of power in relation to the art and artists they are experiencing. One organization describes a patron base that often falls in love with individual artists – applauding exceptional talent – and is ready to create opportunities for these individuals. What these patrons sometimes miss, however, is that there are thousands of other people who, given a chance to work on their craft, could be just as talented and just as support-worthy. While these patrons are willing to intervene in the life of an individual, they do not take a view of the systems that are reproducing unequal opportunities.

As Nashville sees growth of a younger and more socially progressive population, institutions anticipate a growing culture that 'doesn't care about the color of someone's skin.' Though these trends are heralded as progress, assumptions about the desirability of "color-blindness" should be examined for they ways the might obscure implicit biases and mute experiences of institutionalized racism.[11]

Levers to pull: opportunities and openings to advance cultural equity

Initiate micro interventions toward macro level change

While most arts non-profits are ready to take steps to engage more deeply in cultural equity work, they seek guidance and supports to make it more possible. For instance, to build data capacity, they seek information on how to improve methods of obtaining demographic data and better opportunities to express their organizations' social impact both qualitatively and quantitatively. Other organizations expressed that they cannot "go it alone" and one leader believed that building connections with communities is actually not their job. To expedite the development of community partnerships, these non-profits look to an outside entity to convene a community partner meet-and-greet or "community partner speed-dating", as one leader called it. Nonprofits should certainly feel supported in their efforts to forge relationships, but it is worth noting that one-off meetings are likely to produce thin and highly transactional partnerships rather than lasting or meaningful relationships that could cultivate mutual understanding.

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[11] Wise, T. (2010). *Colorblind.* San Francisco, CA: City Light Books.

To go beyond transactional relationships, urban studies scholar Michael Rios, speaking on the role of arts and culture in community development, suggests that cities need to build a capacity to work at the interstices and to cultivate a cohort of individuals and groups that can serve as translators, gatekeepers, and bridges between communities of practice and communities of interest. In particular, this cohort needs to be adept at facilitating opportunities for dialogue and collaboration, at engaging in ongoing education, in conducting institutional and power analyses, and at social negotiation and brokering. Indeed, arts non-profits could have a powerful impact were they to cultivate this capacity internally and to adopt this skillset as part of their core artistic work.

Though some institutions have developed ways to grow the pool of diverse artists, they support larger scale efforts to stimulate the "creative pipeline" among populations under-represented in the arts by both attracting them from other cities as well as by developing and professionalizing the local artist population. Beyond their own efforts, they hope to see funded internships programs for young people to gain exposure and experience in artistic careers; advocacy within K-12 schools to encourage arts careers; development of advanced degree-programs to help artists professionalize while staying in Nashville; and increased financial support for teaching artists who can practice their craft and also apply these skills in community.

The majority of organizations believe that there are limits to what they can do without increased public support. Several leaders expressed that having stronger support for the whole arts ecosystem from the city would allow them to scale the work that they are already doing well: providing opportunities for engagement with high quality artistic work. A more robust financial commitment would permit them, as one respondent

articulated, to think more bravely about their work and role in the city ecosystem.

Acknowledge and leverage positions of power

Many arts non-profits leaders maintain a perception that advocating for equity in the city means taking on a 'political' or 'policy making' role or being able to speak the 'academic' language of social inequality. One leader challenged this notion by suggesting that, instead, advocacy for equity means cultivating understanding and creating opportunities through one-on-one experiences. Indeed, this ethic reflects a model of social change that is based not on top-down decision making, but on changing the way we see ourselves and each other – a role that arts and cultural institutions have prided themselves on playing. While the diversity approach does create opportunities to see other experiences, cultures, and ideas, it reflects what Rios has called an ongoing quest for greater *authenticity* – better and more representations of "the real" experiences or desires of a particular group, ethnicity, heritage, or identity. The risks of cultural appropriation are heightened. Arts non-profits and other cultural advocates might be well-served by another quest – one for greater *sincerity* that is cultivated through critical reflection on our own habits, behaviors, biases, and prejudices in order to gain an awareness of our positions of power and privilege.

At the same time that institutions would do well to develop this internal gaze, arts and cultural institution leaders are self-admittedly in influential positions within the ecosystem of Nashville, in their respective industries and among cultural leaders nationally if not internationally. Nashville is home to some of the most top grossing and longest standing cultural institutions nationally; several institutions are doing regional, national or

even world premieres of artistic works; some have been keys driver of the downtown's development, and many of the leaders sit on boards or serve in directing roles of national associations. This degree of influence demands that Nashville's arts and cultural organizations be present and active in conversations about equity and persistent in their commitments to dismantling structural inequities.

Harness collective energy toward meaningful action

Though a few cultural organization leaders have participated in opportunities like Leadership Nashville or the Center for Nonprofit Management networking events and workshops with fellow executives, most claim they have not been active participants in citywide policy or planning conversations that relate to their cultural work. A few leaders mentioned the Nashville Arts Coalition as a space to discuss policy issues as they relate to the arts, but, overall, this was not seen as a highly active space. Collaborative spaces are "missing", a number of leaders noted, but the need for them is recognized. One leader expressed that the arts sector needs to figure out how to be more effective in dialoguing with city decision makers to ensure community values are reflected in plans regarding Nashville's growth and development. Several leaders share a sense that the arts sector as a whole will be impacted heavily if issues surrounding transportation access, education and economic opportunities, housing affordability, and gentrification are not addressed through a lens of equity. Indeed, Metro Arts seeks to seize on these sentiments and convene arts non-profits around tackling social inequity and finding ways to advance arts non-profits' commitments to Nashville's communities.

Collaborative work will require that participants and conveners recognize the underlying appreciations and tensions held among institutions within Nashville's arts and culture ecosystem. Larger and longer-established institutions have come to feel underappreciated and sidelined despite having fought hard to become major players in the city, to maintain their own strong standing and the creative image of Nashville, and build success that has in turn created opportunities for smaller organizations. In fact, many of these smaller organizations do believe that "the city needs it all" and appreciate that in order to be a textured creative environment, Nashville needs those majors that attract attention (and dollars) regionally, nationally and internationally. Many leaders from smaller organizations, especially those doing edgy or provocative works, noted that they can take artistic risks that their colleagues in the larger major institutions cannot – they are not as concerned about offending a single donor and their audiences are more niche.

By the same token, they believe that the larger cultural organizations need the smaller ones to provide the services and create artistic opportunities outside of the typical canons. Smaller entities can be more nimble and more responsive with their work in communities. They can create, for example, opportunities to affirm communities' existing cultural place and products rather than promoting a western or European artistic ideal.

While they appreciate the affordances of being in an internationally recognized creative city, arts non-profit leaders also have concerns about Nashville's cultural identity. One participant wondered whether the dominant narrative of "Music City" perpetuates a history of marginalization, prompting questions regarding what music and whose music is celebrated, what kind of art is celebrated and recognized, and what kinds of artists can thrive here. Another suggested that the strength of the music industry has catapulted the city into an image of creative maturity for which it is not ready: while its music institutions are well into adulthood, the

city has not invested in developing the other creative arts institutions through their adolescence.

While there are those who do not yet envision a policy role for Nashville's arts non-profits, there are others who believe that the fit is an appropriate one. Speaking on the potential role in education policy, one person suggested that the arts can "recalibrate and inject some reality" into conversations around what is being offered to students and what they need or expect out of the educational system. Another leader recalled his organization's founding mission: to be influential in discussions about the work of the humanities in the creation and substance of public policy. He stated eloquently: "Humanities can absolutely speak to things like sustainability and city planning, all manner of public policy because it's about learning how to hear each other."

Conclusion

Arts non-profits in Nashville are working to combat overt biases and discrimination while finding ways to reduce financial barriers to access. As a whole, they engage in extensive programming across the city to ignite the creative lives of residents – and young people in particular. Institutions express a desire to connect with each other on shared visions, goals, and challenges; further they see value in collaborative efforts to reduce burgeoning tensions and enhance services for a broad Nashville community.

Institutional leaders are eager to learn how to do better. Framing opportunities to collaborate as positive learning environments will certainly aid in institutions' readiness to participate, but the hard work of being reflexive and applying the learning should not be understated. Institutions that participate in a process should be prepared to do work, confront issues sometimes deeply personal, and encounter perspectives hotly debated. In an early reflection on lessons learned from its commitments to advancing racial equity in arts philanthropy, Grantmakers in the Arts echoed this conclusion – that the work takes time, requires focus and persistence, calls for active listening and critical reflection, and is not easy though it is rewarding.[12]

Moving ahead, Nashville's non-profit arts and cultural institutions are convinced that if the arts sector can work collaboratively it "has the potential to do amazing things" and move the needle on equity. As a city with an established creative identity, it can leverage its unique creative resources to change the conversation about arts being a driver of the city's equitable development.

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[12] Brown, J. (2015). "Lessons Learned So Far on GIA's Journey toward Racial Equity in Arts Philanthropy." *GIA Reader, 26*(2).