

REAL: Racial Equity and Arts Leadership

Cadre Overview

Nashville is a rapidly growing Sunbelt City, with a high concentration of creative workers and artists and high general rates of cultural participation (National Center for Arts Research, 2014). The Nashville MSA includes 1.7 million people and is projected to grow by one million in 25 years, including massive expansion in Hispanic, senior and millennial populations. By 2040, our city will not have a racial/ethnic majority, or a dominant economic industry. This demographic and economic pluralism intensifies issues of connectivity, cultural participation and community identity throughout the region.

Like most urban areas in the U.S., many nonprofit cultural institutions have focused on producing work and developing audiences within a framework that appeals culturally and socioeconomically to their main subscribers and members. This leads to a business model that can overlook diverse voices and isolate such institutions from the cultural plurality and sociocultural reality of most large cities. As emergent social movements like #BlackLivesMatter indicate, there is a deep disparity in racial and socioeconomic experiences in the United States. As a population, the U.S. is changing, and resulting tension is not an outlier but a central disconnect that must be addressed both in cities and the cultural organizations that exist within them.

The Pew Research Center indicates that more than 60% of people living in the U.S. residents identify as multiracial and that incomes across the country are growing at historically low rates. Effectively, the audiences within large municipal communities are fundamentally different from the audiences that established and supported our historic cultural institutions. Understanding and unpacking racial and income inequity will be a key driver of municipal policies and urban ecosystems for the foreseeable future. Communities and cultural producers must come together to address inequities of race and income because promoting and practicing justice is essential to the survival of both urban communities and cultural institutions.

Transformation of cultural organizational practices is crucial as issues of survival and equity continue to emerge. It is what Dr. Steven Tepper and Bill Ivey refer to as “Engaging Art” (*Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Culture*, 2008): a movement away from only artistic production and transaction, to proactive understanding and full participation in the community ecosystem. Common vernacular defines this as community based development or creative placemaking. At its base is what ArtPlace America director, Jamie Bennett, frames as “arts organizations [...] working with other members of their communities to help build better futures” (ArtPlace America Blog, July 23, 2013). This is a sea change for many institutions that creates both risk and opportunity relative to audience relationships, business enterprise and artistic direction.

The critical first step in transformation is the willingness to discover the institutional biases and inequity practices that may live within our employees and our institutions, and to re-learn habits that facilitate community and conversation.

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Metro Arts and Vanderbilt's Curb Center for Art, Enterprise & Public Policy are working together through public lectures, a moderated learning cadre and research to support local cultural nonprofits interested in beginning this journey toward transformation. Our goal is to understand how our local cultural organizations are working through the complex intersections of race with other inequities such as class and gender, within their institutions and the larger city ecosystem.

REAL is a learning cadre that first and foremost creates a Safe Space where cultural leaders can review research and leading practices in the field on cultural equity.

Through discussion we hope to better reveal the impact of racism on organizations and art forms, and create a peer network dedicated to positive change. Topics that may be covered include, but aren't limited to: demographic research and realities, unpacking how "artistic excellence" can signal code for race and class minimialization, authenticity in community conversations and outreach, understanding leading practices and examples of cultural institutions driving change internally and in communities.

How will we get there?

REAL is: A peer learning cadre that meets monthly for 90 minutes with a moderator. It is open to any individual who works in a decision-making role (full or part time) within one of Nashville's cultural institutions. Based on applicant pool, multiple individuals from one organization may participate.

REAL Sessions: Take place from 11:30 am-1:00 pm at Vanderbilt's Curb Center on October 7, November 11, December 9, January 13, February 10, March 9, April 13 and May 11. Lunch will be provided for the first and last sessions, participants are encouraged to bring their own lunches for remaining sessions.

Metro Arts will:

- Provide a \$250 stipend to cadre members or their organization to support participation.
- Work with Vanderbilt to create a program that provides high quality information and discussion that advances the sector.
- Cover costs related to speakers, moderators and supplies with Vanderbilt.
- NOT use any information shared within the cadre relative to funding or partnership decisions.

Vanderbilt will:

- Cover costs related to speakers, moderators and supplies with Metro Arts.
- Provide a meeting location and document notes of each session.
- Observe and document REAL conversations for the purposes of cultural research.

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REAL participants must:

- Commit to attend all group sessions.
- Ensure organizational support/sign off related to participation in the cadre.
- Agree to be honest and respectful during difficult exploratory conversations.
- Respect the safe space and norms of the group.
- Commit to project evaluation.
- Agree to share learning with others in future sessions or formats.

The ideal REAL applicant:

- Serves in a managerial or decision-making role within the organization (board members are welcome).
- Understands both the artistic genre of the organization they are representing and has practical understanding of the cultural organization's business model and practices.
- Has a commitment from senior leadership to explore and understand how race equity is critical for cultural participation and growth.
- Is fair minded, willing to listen and willing to be personally and professionally challenged as part of the cadre.
- Is willing to share their learning for peers in future cadres.